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OUTWITTED BY HERSELF; OR, A MOTHER'S SCHEME.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH,

AUTHOR OF "A DESPERATE VENTURE," ETC., ETC.



"A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS, MISS ERLESCOMBE."

Outwitted by Herself;

OR,

A MOTHER'S SCHEME.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH,

AUTHOR OF "IS LOVE A MOCKERY," "THE HAND OF FATE," "WHAT SHE COST HIM," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PASSING STRANGER.

THE afternoon sun was shining upon the lawn, the river was running tranquilly below it, and under the great oak tree was gathered what might be taken for the happiest of family parties. The rubicund gentlemanly paterfamilias, portly and good-natured, reclined in his easy-chair, with a paper on his knee and a cup of tea beside him. His handsome wife, well-dressed and smiling, sat near him, with Kensington work in her hand; while his only daughter, young and beautiful, presided over the pretty lunch table with its silver service; and near her stood a trusted friend of the family, a grave, middle-aged, professional-looking man, who had taken a short holiday from the whirl of city life to enjoy the country air and hospitality of Elm Grove.

All look peaceful and bright; each one seemed ignorant of such a thing as care or trouble. What a pity it is that appearances cannot be relied on—that beneath the scene of calmest beauty may slumber a volcano, and a skeleton repose in the most attractive-looking cupboard.

"Winnie, dear," said Mrs. Erlescombe, "what are you going to do this evening?"

Winnie started a little when spoken to, and brought her blue eyes back from a far-away, thoughtful glance across the river; the friend of the family started too, and turned his gaze from the sweet girlish face it had been lingering upon for longer than its owner knew.

"I am going to drive into Blyton, I think," said Winnie, rising. "I'll match your silks for you if you like, mother."

"I dare say Mr. Hampton will go and take care of you." The lady mother smiled upon the friend of the family. "You don't object to drive in a *tiny* pony-phaeton, do you, Mr. Hampton?"

"I object to nothing in Miss Winnie's society!" replied Mr. Hampton, rising with alacrity, and a labored effort at gallantry.

"I object to being called Miss Winnie," pouted the young lady, turning toward the house; "I have told you that ever so many times!"

"I should like to call you Winnie, without the formal prefix," said he, speaking quite in a low and impressive tone.

"Then I should object to you," she laughed.

"Cruel fair one!—how am I to please you?"

"Oh, in twenty ways, if you want to do so. I never discovered your anxiety to distinguish yourself in this way before."

"You never permit me to give vent to my feelings!"—reproachfully. "You snub and throw cold water upon every attempt I make to express my heartfelt sentiments—"

"If you are trying to express your heartfelt sentiments," interrupted she, "each time you call me Miss Winnie, I always shall snub you. I like to have my proper title—Miss Erlescombe. Please remember, my title! Miss Winnie reminds me of a servant!"—scornfully.

"I am your servant—your humble, devoted servant!" returned he, boldly.

"If you talk like this going up to the town, I shall overturn you," raising her bewitching, saucy eyes to his face with a smile; "I shall, really!"

"You have already overturned my every thought and resolution. You have overturned my mind, my heart, and its peace, its safety," whispered he. "The same treatment applied to my body, will be of little comparative consequence."

"But you won't like it when it comes to your body, all the same though. Hearts and minds, and—what is it you said?—resolutions—what are they, pray?—can stand a good many more accidents, than flesh and bones. Now I come to think of it, Mr. Hampton, I am not at all sure that you will like my pony-phaeton. Consider the matter before you get in. Do you mind doubling up your limbs like a lobster's?"

"Not in the least. I shall enjoy it."

"It is an awfully little carriage. There really is hardly room for two, and you are not as small as you might be," said she, surveying him doubtfully.

"I feel as small as it is possible for a man to do always in your company, Miss Erlescombe, I assure you."

"That is all very well, but your feelings are not the point. It is the look of the thing I am considering. I don't want to drive a person who hangs over the sides. He looks untidy. And then, if we do get you packed in the carriage, it would not be fair to let you start without warning you of the steed's peculiarities. He runs away sometimes—yes, very fast; and when he runs he falls down, and the features of the people he runs away with get smashed. Do you mind having your features disfigured?"

Mr. Hampton's grave, hard features relaxed into a smile.

"How long have you had this animal with these dangerous proclivities? I should feel inclined to dispose of him and buy a sounder one."

She looked at him in pretty, affected indignation.

"How like a man! Dispose of a creature because he is unfortunate! I have not had Brownie long, but I have become so inseparably attached to him that I am sure I am not going to dispose of him, Mr. Hampton, as you term it, just because he can't always stand up. There may come a day when you are unfortunate enough to fall."

"A very likely day, indeed, I should say," he ejaculated.

"Well, and shall you expect to be disposed of then?"—laughing.

"It is hardly an analogous case. Your pony runs away, too, I thought you said."

"So I did, but that is merely his play; and he has only those two little bad points, while his good ones are innumerable. At any rate, I am so attached to the darling that I would not dispose of him, Mr. Hampton, if he smashed—all my friends' features,"—mischievously.

"We can bear accidents to our friends philosophically," moralized her companion. "Do you soon become attached to animals and men, Miss Erlescombe?"

"I love animals at first sight, as a rule; but as for men,"—with a pretty grimace—"I have to put up with seeing them about and all that, you know; but to become attached to any of them must be an impossibility for any one, I should say. There is nothing in them to become attached to—at least, as far as my experience goes,"—modestly.

"That is scarcely the general opinion of your sex," he returned, grimly.

"I am not giving you general opinions; I am giving you only my own private and particular ones," rejoined she, saucily.

He stopped her, as she would have tripped past him up the stairs.

"You talk of men," said he, speaking in a compressed kind of earnestness, at which she struggled hard not to laugh; "but if you could form an attachment to only one member of my unfortunate sex, it would be as much as I should require or ask of you."

"That is very good and thoughtful of you, I am sure. I would do a great deal to please a friend of papa's like you, Mr. Hampton. I will try if I can do even so much as that for your sake, some day." And she ran upstairs, leaving her merry voice ringing in his ear.

When she came down again she looked more enchanting than ever. Over her white dress and its creamy lace trimmings she wore a fluffy lace cape, against which her golden-brown hair shone sleek and bright. She had put on a huge Gainsborough hat, which shaded one side of her pretty face, but coquettishly exposed the broad, low brow, and soft pink cheek, and darkly-lashed eye on the other; one little rosebud peeped out from the snowy ostrich feathers, in which the hat was smothered; and she was drawing on gloves that had eight but tons each at least.

Mr. Hampton stepped forward to fasten them for her, or attempt to do so, but he proved clumsy and slow.

"All men are clumsy and slow," remarked she, calmly; "at least, as far as my experience is concerned. Don't you think so?"

"I think your experience is very imperfect in comparison with what it will be," said he.

"What it will be! I wonder what it will be before we get home again?"

They had started, and were skimming along a picture of a country road, he holding the reins and she finishing her gloves.

"Thank you; I will take the reins now. You are sure you are all in the carriage, not trailing behind or anything? I mean you are comfortable?"

"I am more than comfortable—I am happy!"—with a deep breath.

"You said that as if you were not always so,"—with a sudden kindly glance.

"Lately I have not been, I own."

"Why?" Then hurriedly, "I beg your pardon; I did not mean to be inquisitive."

"I wish I dare tell you why. Do you think I dare?"

"I don't know how much courage you have; but I am sure you have not time to tell anything before we get into Blyton," returned she, coloring a little, more from his tone than from a suspicion of what he might be going to say. "How beautifully Brownie is going now, is he not?"

"Miss Erlescombe, hear me for one moment."

"There, Mr. Hampton! you will distract my thoughts from my business—driving. Brownie was as nearly as anything on his nose just now. I feel a sort of responsibility for your features, you know. If I broke the nose of papa's broker, why, I should never forgive myself, even were it his own fault for distracting my attention needlessly."

"Will you allow me to get out here for a minute?" asked he, in a deeply-offended tone, as they at that moment passed a book-store, "I will not detain you long."

"Oh, pray don't hurry yourself! Musty old stock reports is it you are in quest of? I'll drive on and get mother's silks, and then come back for you. You need be in no hurry, really."

She departed to the fancy store, and returned before Mr. Hampton had emerged again; but as the frisky little pony waited at the curb-stone, with his head turned homeward, a cumbrous engine came, with unearthly noise, and a long train of freight cars behind it, down a side street. The smoke, the sound, the apparition, were more than Brownie could stand. In an instant, before the driver was aware of his intention, he had got his head well down from under her control, and was off, with the bit between his teeth, tearing as for dear life, down the quiet street and into the country, toward the stable he loved so well. Winnie sat perfectly still, though her lips grew white, and she cast one frightened glance around, as she dashed into the narrow road. If Brownie kept straight in his wild course, and avoided the ditches of his own free will, and they met nothing, all might end well. But, alas! as they reached the narrowest part of the pretty road, where, with nicest care and judgment, two vehicles could only just pass between the high banks, she saw advancing a great old-fashioned wagon and horses. No room for it to turn. No time for anything

but a wild longing for a stronger hand than her own—a wild prayer, and a wild resignation to what must happen.

Then from out the bushes, or from out the bank, or from some unexpected and most happy spot, a stranger at that moment sprung, seized the naughty little pony's head in a grasp whose muscle was equal to the occasion, and the danger was averted. The panting pony stopped, and she stood face to face with an unknown man, who had undoubtedly saved her life. Just for a moment she felt as if she must faint, but the color came rushing into her cheeks as she encountered the dark, handsome glance of the stranger, and she laughed.

"I am so deeply, truly thankful to you," said she, lifting two of the most grateful and bluest eyes he had ever seen. "But I can't help laughing, because it is so romantic, so odd, so book-like, that you should come forth to save me at the exact instant, like this. You are just—just the exact—just the very type of—"

"Yes?" he interposed, with an interested bend forward as she paused.

"Type of a hero of romance," she was going to say; "the exact copy of the handsome knight-errant who proverbially, in romance, appears at the critical moment to rescue a forlorn damsel. But, somehow, as she surveyed the stalwart figure (over six feet high), the unmistakably gentlemanly appearance, the dark, handsome face of that knight; above all, as she met his amused glance, the first fit of shyness her life had ever known seized Miss Winnie, and her ready flow of nonsense deserted her.

"I mean in real life it would generally have been an old man with a basket, or a horrid boy, or a foolish woman who would have appeared for my deliverance, you know," stammered she.

"Neither of those three specimens would have had strength to deliver you, I fear," laughed he. "This strong little beast nearly knocked me down," patting the wicked Brownie.

"You are very strong!" said Winnie; after which flattering remark she went round in some confusion and patted Brownie's other side, and the stranger took the opportunity of steadily regarding her.

She looked up, and caught him in the act; and because of that act, or because of the unmistakable admiration with which his eyes had become filled, she blushed furiously, and got into the phaeton again.

"I don't like you to drive home by yourself," said he, as if he had some suddenly-acquired right to direct her proceedings. "This little brute is not to be trusted. Have you far to go?" looking affectionately at the vacant seat in her carriage.

"Only to Elm Grove—half a mile, perhaps," replied Winnie, passing over the unkindness of the titles bestowed upon her darling pony, and fidgeting with the reins.

"I wish you would trust me to escort you there. My name is Clyde Douglas," with a bow. "I am down here for a few days' fishing. I am awfully glad I just happened to be walking down this road at the right moment!"

"It was a lucky thing," said Winnie. "But, Mr. Douglas, I—I don't like to trouble you any further, and"—with a sudden remembrance of Mr. Hampton—"I have an escort somewhere about," looking behind her. "I forgot him. I wonder what has become of him?" feeling vexed with poor, innocent Mr. Hampton.

"The escort I left behind me?" quoted Mr. Douglas amusedly. "May I escort you back to look for him? You will know him when you see him, won't you?"

"He is not a laughing matter," smiled Winnie. "He is a heavy, stern reality—so heavy that I believe it was delight at getting rid of him that made Brownie play this trick of naughtiness. Was not it darling, eh?" she said to the pony.

"If he inspires Brownie with tricks, let us

not seek for him. I am more worthy than he. Let me take his place."

And Clyde Douglas spoke with the utmost confidence.

"I could not doubt your worthiness," laughed the girl. "But I believe—Brownie and I believe—you are not one bit less heavy than the Mr. Hampton we have lost."

"Bodily or conversationally?" he asked, insinuatingly. "I ask because I noticed you driving the lost escort up to Blyton half an hour ago, and he seemed to me—He is not a particular friend of yours, is he?"

"He is my father's broker."

"Exactly. Then I may mention that his companionship appeared, to a passing observer, to have some weight about it—the weight of brains, probably,"—with a smile that fascinated Winnie, since it lighted up his countenance.

"He is heavy," she sighed, drawing aside to make room for Mr. Douglas to enter the carriage. "But he is so worthy—the friend of our whole family,"—repentantly.

"Worth weighs. For that reason Brownie will not find me too much. I have no family friendships intrusted to me."

"Where did you see us as we went into Blyton?" asked Miss Erlescombe, curiously. "I never noticed you, I am quite sure!"—with emphasis.

"You were too engrossed with Mr. Hampton. I noticed you!"

But he forbore to mention that because of that notice he had been found in this road. Perhaps he did not think it advisable to confess how one passing glance at her had interested him to such an extent that he had made it his business to find out her name and place of abode, after which he proceeded to haunt her return path to make sure of another glimpse of the face that had charmed him strangely. But although she knew it not, it was because she was young and pretty that Winifred Erlescombe drove a fascinating stranger home to her gates, and left the friend of her family to toil on foot and arrive late for dinner.

CHAPTER II.

WHO IS HE?

"My dear, is not this a very extraordinary thing?"—Mr. Erlescombe burst fussily into his wife's dressing-room as her maid was putting the finishing touches to her toilet for dinner—"a most remarkable thing? The happiest escape I ever heard of! You are aware of what has just happened, of course?"

"Of course you invariably jump to a wrong conclusion, Robert!" returned the lady, coldly.

"But I am aware that it is impossible to hear from you any thing in any way that any human being can understand! How you can be so excited and incoherent at your age—"

"How on earth can I be excited and incoherent at anybody else's age?" argued her better-half, annoyed.

"Well, well,"—leniently. "You say something has happened? You can go, Mary," turning to the maid.

"Your daughter—our daughter, Winnie, you know, has just been saved from a fearful death—from being smashed to pieces by one of those confounded country teams. I declare I will stir the sheriff up about it; I have no doubt the fellow was asleep on the seat! And she has driven him home, a fine young man, a most taking young man, as I am sure you will pronounce when you see him, Susan; and, my dear," coming meekly a little nearer, "I wish you would invite him to dinner! There is no question about our being most deeply indebted to him, and I would not appear inhospitable for worlds!"

"You would not appear intelligible, you mean! Winnie has driven home a man who was asleep on a seat and got crushed under a wagon? Pray, how can he eat any dinner?"

"My dear, you comprehend so slowly!

Winnie has driven home the young man who saved her from being crushed to death. Brownie bolted, and they met a wagon, and this young stranger sprung out and checked the pony."

"How do you know he did not startle it at first? You are but a baby in the ways of the world, Robert."

"Indeed? I flatter myself—" began her injured spouse pulling up his collar.

But the better-half went calmly on: "Winnie has driven home a young man, has she? Then, pray, where is Mr. Hampton, and who is this young man? Let me look at him"—walking to the window, and raising her eye-glasses.

"'Pon my soul! I forgot all about Hampton!" said Mr. Erlescombe. "I should think the wagon did not go over him, or they would have mentioned it. There they are, you see, standing by the phaeton, just below there. Fine young fellow, isn't he? I don't know that I ever saw one better built; and I like his way of speaking, too!"

"A most impudent young man!" said Mrs. Erlescombe, regarding him steadily. "Detaining my daughter at her ball-door when she ought to be dressing for dinner! I never saw a young man I thought more suspicious and objectionable-looking at first sight, I must say! Robert, go down and send him about his business!"—with a commanding wave of her hand.

"My dear, I—er—in fact. I have mentioned something about dinner," objected Mr. Erlescombe meekly.

"Then I shall go down and mention something not about dinner. A stranger who sprung out of a wagon!"

"No, my dear Susan; that is a mistake on your part. So far as I could gather, he had nothing to do with the wagon; he came out from the bushes at the side of the road."

"The bushes or the ditch," returned she, in grand contempt, "it is all the same! An adventurer, a horse-stealer! He is not likely to be asked to dine with me and my daughter!"—raising her cap.

"Why, you don't know a gentleman when you see one!" retorted her husband, growing exasperated.

"Thanks! I know what is wise, and prudent, and safe when you have daughters under your care. Has this young man money or family to boast of, Robert?"

"My dear, how could I ask those personal questions in a two minutes' interview?"

"You had no business to have an interview with a man of whose position and prospects you knew nothing. Men really are the most trying, unreasonable animals on the face of the earth!" pronounced the lady, preparing to descend, with fan, gloves and handkerchief in battle array.

"Except women!" muttered her better-half.

"Except some women, certainly! That daughter of yours is behaving now in the most trying, reprehensible manner—looking at that adventurer as if she were quite pleased with him, I declare! Robert, come down and support me!" sweeping forward. "Remember Mr. Hampton!"

"I don't think you need much support," said the henpecked husband, following her slowly; and he muttered, in a lower key, "Confound Hampton! I never have the ghost of a chance of forgetting him!"

Mrs. Erlescombe, with the bearing of a queen, and with her battle accouterments—viz., fan, handkerchief and gloves—imposingly held, swept up to the open front door, and said, in the most affectionate of voices, "Winnie, dear, where have you left Mr. Hampton?"

Winnie turned a glowing face from the pony's head, on the other side of which Clyde Douglas stood, and replied, "Oh, I lost him on the road. Mother, let me introduce Mr. Douglas to you. He just came—"

"May I ask who introduced him to you, dear?" the mother said, gently, acknowledging Douglas's bow with the shade of a frozen one.

"A happy circumstance, or rather what

might have proved a fatal accident to your daughter!" said the young stranger, with his frank, charming air and manly voice.

"I should have been killed, mother, to a dead certainty!" said Winnie, in a low, intense tone.

"Tut, tut! these things always get exaggerated," replied the lady, with an air of superb calmness. "As it is growing late, I do not think we need detain Mr. Dunwash any longer. I am sure we are greatly obliged to him for being so attentive. The groom shall just drive this pony back and look for dear Mr. Hampton," ringing the stable bell.

"Mother!" said Winnie, in an imploring whisper.

"Ah, dear, yes; thanks for reminding me. Mr. Duplex, if you care for it, you are quite welcome to a lift in this carriage as far as ever you wish to go. You are living somewhere about here, I suppose?"—with an airy wave of her hand and its flashing rings.

"I am staying at Blyton for a few days' fishing. You are very kind, Mrs. Erlescombe; but I won't trouble this poor little pony any further, thank you. I like walking," said Douglas, rather as if he were amused at than angered by the lady's contemptuous coldness.

"You are used to a great deal of walking, I dare say?" answered she, condescendingly. "Winnie, my love," with a meaning glance at her daughter, "you know your papa's aversion to any one's keeping dinner waiting. Mr. Duplex, I am sure will excuse us,"—giving another infinitesimal bend of her stately body.

"Mother, he *saved my life!*" whispered the girl, agitatedly.

"My love, you are excited, and so given to exaggeration. Now where can dear Mr. Hampton be, I wonder? He so dislikes to be hurried in dressing for dinner. Winnie, just ring the bell for Marks, will you, and I will give orders to have the dinner put back for a quarter of an hour."

But Miss Erlescombe broke from her mother's majestic hand, and going back to the stranger, put her own in his.

"Mr. Douglas," said she, raising the sweetest, truest, most earnest eyes he had ever seen, "I thank you over and over again for your noble courage and kindness this afternoon, and I only hope I shall see you soon again to say more of the gratitude I feel. Shall I?"

"It lies in your hands," he said, in a low tone, while she in her turn thought that she had never met with eyes she admired so much as his. "There is nothing in this world I should like so much as to see you again."

"Winnie!" said her mother, in a voice which spoke volumes.

And with cheeks a little pinker than usual, Miss Erlescombe followed her mother into the hall.

"Have you seen the view from the summer-house by moonlight?" Mrs. Erlescombe suddenly asked Mr. Hampton, as they sat in the drawing-room after dinner. "The moon is so bright just now it reminded me of it, and I thought perhaps dear Winnie would like to take you to see it. Should you catch cold, my child, if you ran there and back, do you think?"

"Mr. Hampton can't run," observed Winnie, calmly. "He proved as much by the length of time it took him this afternoon to get from that book store home. Mr. Hampton, I should have been smashed a dozen times if I had depended upon you as my cavalier."

Mr. Hampton rose and approached the girl, who stood in a trailing mauve silk gown, with bare arms and neck, and sprays of heliotrope in her hair, looking, if possible, a little prettier than she had done in the afternoon.

"Will you show me this view by moonlight?" he asked, in a low, eager tone.

"Certainly. Have you got overshoes, though, and everything?"

"I don't want them."

"Oh, excuse me, at your age you can't be too careful. Why, I knew an old gentleman once who only just went across the lawn when the dew was falling, and—"

"Winnie!" said her mother, angrily; and the girl laughed as she went into the hall.

"Do I appear so very ancient to you?" inquired Mr. Hampton in a suppressed manner, as side by side they went out of the lamp-light and into the silvery world the moon was making enchanting.

"Oh, very!" said she, readily. "Really, I confuse you with Mr. Methuselah, and the 'Ancient Mariner,' and all those good people sometimes."

"There they go, Robert," murmured Mrs. Erlescombe, standing at the window. "I do hope they'll get something settled. Really, if he does not seize this chance, it is unpardonable. I cannot bear this suspense and planning much longer, and you are a perfect clog instead of a help. Bless the man! he is asleep—asleep as if no ruin hung over his head like a hair, which his daughter may cut at any moment. He is always asleep when we have any affairs of importance to discuss."

"The letters, ma'am," said a servant, opening the door, and approaching with a salver. "And James found this in Miss Erlescombe's carriage, ma'am, and thinks that either Mr. Hampton or the strange young gentleman must have dropped it there this afternoon. It was not there this morning."

"Give it to me," said the lady, taking from the man an eye-glass set in gold and attached to a broken string. She turned it to the light, and there above the initials C. D. was engraved on the gold a coat of arms. She took it close to the candle to make sure, and her face was a study as she turned it about and inspected it.

"A coat of arms!" she gasped. "Is it possible? It must have dropped from that strange young man! Mr. Hampton does not wear an eye-glass. A coat of arms!"

In her bewilderment she turned over the letters. One was for herself and one for her daughter, and she opened her daughter's first. It was only addressed in a schoolfellow's girlish hand; but Mrs. Erlescombe deemed it prudent to keep an eye upon her daughter's correspondence. In her mental perplexity, she opened the envelope and read as follows:

"DARLING WINNIE:—Such a lark! I must tell you! There is an awful aristocratic fellow in your neighborhood, all wrapped up in disguises, traveling *incog.*, you know. He is as rich as a Rothschild and as handsome as Apollo, and his name it is Claude Dunhaven. I know him slightly, and I have just heard that he is going to have a few days' fishing at Blyton under the name of somebody else—pretending to be somebody ordinary, you know; but you can't mistake him—he's so awfully handsome! Tall, dark, splendid eyes, and a dark mustache! And I want you to haunt your lanes or river until you meet him, and then get introduced in some romantic way. Tumble into the river (when you have not your best clothes on), and let him pull you out! He is worth the trouble."

"You know we always said at school you were to marry a millionaire, and I was to marry his poor cousin and live at your gates. Well, I am in love with Mr. Dunhaven's cousin, and that is how I know of his proceedings. He is awfully romantic, and does these queer, mysterious, romantic little things every now and again. His object in life is to find some girl in love with him who does not care about his money or position, you know, and you are exactly the girl to suit him, *ma chere*. Don't tell your mother a word, because she is such an old maneuverer, if you don't mind my saying so, and would just frighten him away. I judge him by his cousin."

"Don't you pretend to know a word of this, either. Treat him as if he were just what he pretends to be; but make his acquaintance in some way, and let me know the result. If he is anything like his cousin—and some people say he is nicer, but they are stupid, that think too much of filthy lucre—oh, you will be a lucky girl! Your ever affectionate friend, "Eva."

"P. S.—He came down your way yesterday. He may not stop long, so make haste, dear. Find him out in some way or other for the sake of matrimony."

Mrs. Erlescombe stood perfectly still until she had finished reading that gushing epistle three times, and had scrutinized the eye-glass in every possible way four times; then she hurriedly hid away both glass and letter deep in her pocket, and marching to the window, elevated her shrill voice and called, "Winnie!"

The sound went traveling through the moonlight and over the shrubbery, and reached

Winnie just as Mr. Hampton was holding her hand in a tremulous, clammy way, and saying, "Miss Erlescombe, you must give me your serious attention for one moment now."

"Look at the view!" said Winnie.

"I prefer to look at you. You must listen to me now."

"But I can't, you see, for my mamma is calling me. I will do the next best thing I can for you, Mr. Hampton—I will race you back to the house. One, two, three, and off! If you can run, now is your time to catch me." She was speeding away, light and bright as a bird.

"Guide me back," he implored. "I shall lose my way."

"Mr. Hampton, that is trying to obtain assistance under false pretenses. Well, come along, then, as fast as you can toddle—I beg your pardon, I mean walk. I will sing you a touching song about the owl and the pussy-cat as soon as I get indoors."

She had enthralled him completely. Her bright beauty and her winning gayety made him utterly indifferent to her carelessness of his feelings and the total lack of respect and deference in her manner to him. Because she cared so little for him, he cared far more than she dreamed for her.

He came in submissive and silent, the elderly, clever, wealthy, potential man of business, and stood at the girl's side as she sung random songs in a sweet and well-trained voice.

Mrs. Erlescombe took the opportunity to march across to her husband, whom the sound of the piano had awakened.

"Robert, I have been thinking the matter over, and it strikes me you treated that young man shamefully this afternoon—most ungratefully—the stranger who saved our child!"

"I treated him! Well, I like that!" gasped Mr. Erlescombe, fanning himself with his handkerchief, and blinking under injustice and drowsiness. "It was yourself, my dear, pardon me, who, against my wishes—against my expressed wishes, I may say—" raising his tone.

"Pooh! Your expressed wishes!" said she. "You came up to my room with your face—with your face—"

"How on earth could I come up without my face?"—peevishly.

"Interruptions are in such bad taste. You came up with your face as red as a turkey's, and you were quite incoherent through excitement. You used bad language, and mixed up sheriffs and men upon seats, and all the revolting things you could think of, until really I quite mistook the true facts of the case."

"I am glad you own it,"—in a side mutter. "I think you often mistake a good many cases."

"I beg your pardon!"—freezingly. "What were you observing?" he asked.

"Nothing!"—hurriedly.

"You were saying, my dear—"

"That when I calmly think the matter over, I fear that brave, kind, most gallant young man must have thought us singularly wanting in gratitude—nay, even in common civility."

Sweeping to her writing table, she said: "I am going to make what hasty reparation I can. I shall send him a note saying how grieved I am that your excitability and want of comprehension made you treat him in such a seemingly uncivil way."

"My want of comprehension?—my want of manners? Well, upon my life, woman!" in exasperation.

"What woman are you addressing?" demanded she, coolly. "Your life won't be worth much to declare upon, I can assure you, unless you put a check upon your excitability and temper. Every day I live in the expectation, Robert—the full expectation that you will have a fit!"

"You live remarkably comfortable upon it!" growled he.

"I am as comfortable as I can be under the circumstances with which you have surrounded me," retorted she, meaningly. "But to re-

turn to an important matter, I shall ask this young man—Mr. Douglas, I believe—charming name—to come and stay with us during the time he likes to remain in this neighborhood; to look upon our house as his home, in fact, and come to us as early as he can to-morrow morning. That is the least return we can make for his self-devotion—his self-sacrifice, I may say."

"It appears to me that you may say anything—nay, that you do say anything! Upon my soul," said the badgered man, rising and shaking himself, "I never did hear a woman talk backward and forward like you! I declare it quite bewilders me!"

"It does not take much to do that!" replied she, scornfully. "But there is one thing I wish to impress upon you. Be civil to this young man, Robert, when he comes, and make much of him. You can leave the rest to me."

CHAPTER III.

AN OFFER.

"MOTHER and I are going to the circus this afternoon," announced Winifred Erlescombe, seating herself gracefully at the luncheon-table. "But it is not my mother's desire, as you may perhaps imagine; it is mine. I saw the procession from the distance that lends enchantment, this morning, and I have fallen in love with every one of those sweet spotted, clown-driven ponies. The only question is, can we find a gentleman to escort us?"

"There is nothing I should enjoy more!" said Clyde Douglas, from one side of the table, quickly; while from the other, Mr. Hampton was heard to say, "I shall be delighted, I am sure!"

Winnie answered the last speaker first.

"Are you sure, Mr. Hampton? Because I never heard of such a thing as a broker at a circus. Are you quite prepared, now, for what it will be? There won't be any bulls or bears, or stocks or bidding, or anything that will look home like to you, you know."

"Mr. Hampton will go to take care of me," said the lady mother, giving him an awfully sweet smile.

"Oh! shall you be home-like? At any rate, you and Mr. Hampton can sit and frown together at the clown's jokes, can't you. But Mr. Douglas will see there the exact thing he likes."

"He is sure of it, for you will be there!" said Douglas, using a tone too low for anybody but the girl herself to hear.

She heard, and colored.

Mr. Hampton frowned horribly, in anticipation, perhaps, of the clown's follies.

"If we are all going to enjoy ourselves so much, I think we had better start," said Winnie, rising. "You have all finished, I hope? Mother, would you and Mr. Hampton like ten minutes' start?"

"It might be well," said Mrs. Erlescombe.

"Young feet, Mr. Hampton, can trip more lightly than our old ones, can they not?"

"It is a question I have not studied," said the man addressed morosely. "I know the capabilities of my own. They could attend Miss Winnie's with ease, but, of course, the qualifications of your feet are beyond me. They may embrace bunions."

"You are so very funny!" said the lady, who had a bunion or two secreted. "If you'll hold my parasol for me, we will start now, shall we? I am sure you'll amuse me all the way if you go on like this."

He scarcely spoke a word to her all the way. The whole walk along the shady lanes, and across the sunny field which cut off half a mile, was one series of strategic movements between Mr. Hampton and the lady mother, she striving to let no interruption happen to the handsome couple coming behind, walking together; he determined to have some of Winifred's attention at any hazards, and beating his adversary at the field by getting ungallantly over the stile first, and hurrying the girl away

with him along the path, talking to her in jerks, and cutting off her retreat.

Winnie laughed. She was in the best of spirits, and did not seem to care to whom she chattered.

At the circus, Mr. Hampton was one too many for Mrs. Erlescombe; he arranged himself between her and her daughter.

"Sitting like patience on a monument of red carpet and rickety planks," laughed Winnie, turning to him, "smiling at clowns," as four specimens came in, and began to turn somersaults and make grimaces violently, by way of creating amusement.

"I am smiling at you," said he, with a certain amount of sternness in his voice.

"Not in that tone, I trust. Mr. Hampton, if this absurdity, that weaker brains like mine and Mr. Douglas's (laughing at the young man with the full assurance of being welcomed with a warm glance and return smile), 'call fun, gets too much for your temper—'"

"It is not the circus that is likely to be too much for my temper, thank you."

"Oh, well, I mean if all these people bobbing through hoops and things irritate you, go out; don't wait for us. Go home and read the stock reports. Really, now, look at those ponies; are they not pretty? Mr. Hampton, I wish the fates had made you a great star at a circus!"

"Might I ask why?"—very stiffly. "I have no wish to shine in such capacity."

"Oh, because then I should have admired you! You have long thin limbs that would have been just the thing to caper in the air with; and you have a stiff stateliness of your own that would have been majestic upon seven ponies or three nice old steeds. Look at that man, the groom or something, who just brought in those delicious cream ponies; he has been looking at you for five minutes unwinkingly. I know his sentiments agree with mine, and he is wondering what bribe he could offer you to change your vocation, even at this late time in your life."

"He is looking at you, pardon me," was the grim reply. "He is thinking, perhaps, that you would look much prettier than that young lady now making an idiot of herself upon a piece of rope."

"He is looking at Mr. Douglas," decided Miss Erlescombe. "He is thinking what a striking clown he would make with a red-painted nose and a rose-colored dress. He is looking at all three of us. Certainly he keeps his eyes fixed admiringly upon our party—evidently it is the most distinguished-looking present."

"He is a striking-looking man himself," remarked Douglas; "of foreign extraction, I should say, and with that air about him of having seen better days. Don't you think so?"

"I don't quite know what that air is," returned Miss Erlescombe. "I hope he is not a detective in disguise, and going to take either of you gentlemen up. Really those folded arms and that fixed stare are becoming almost too much for me. Won't somebody make him move on? He is like Napoleon at Elba, meditating his escape—from six ponies galloping round him, and three men tying themselves in knots above him. Oh, hurrah, they are all going out."

But the man came in again with the next relay of horses, and again his dark, curious eyes sought that one place in the circle of seats.

"He is looking at you," whispered Douglas to Winifred, "and I don't wonder at it."

"He is looking at you, and I do wonder at it," retorted the young lady, smiling; "because—well, of course one has to glance at you sometimes; but it is a task I should always feel inclined to hurry over."

"It is a thing you certainly always do hurry over," said he, resentfully.

"Would you like my eyes fixed upon you like that strange being's? Why, I think you would be mesmerized! What would you do if you were mesmerized, Mr. Douglas? Something extraordinary, I suppose?"

"Follow you."

"Then I won't mesmerize you; you would be such a nuisance! Oh! the eyes are moving on now, as far as to Mr. Hampton. Now, Mr. Douglas, I fear you are not attending properly to this entertainment. You did not see how that man got himself balanced upon that pole up there."

"I see him, and I see how he can very easily become unbalanced."

At that moment, Mrs. Erlescombe, who had been taking a surreptitious siesta, leaned across and addressed Winnie:

"This is a low affair, and I don't mean to stop another moment. I just found one of the common men's eyes fixed upon me down there; and sitting in the same row with myself, absolutely upon the same plank, I see my dressmaker! I desire you to get down and go out at once, Winifred, without an instant's delay."

"Oh, mother, it is not half over, and Mr. Douglas and Mr. Hampton are enjoying themselves so much! Why should not your dressmaker sit upon the same plank as you?"

"You my child, and ask that question! A dressmaker and I sitting upon the same plank!"—rising and rustling tremendously. "Assist me to descend, Mr. Hampton, if you please. Mr. Douglas, accept my apologies for bringing you to such a mixed affair. It was this willful puss's doing!"

Something seemed to have happened to Mr. Douglas. His brow had darkened, his lips had contracted, his eyes grown stern. Like a man lost in unpleasant thought, he allowed Winnie to step down by herself (she could do it gracefully enough, but she frowned at his inattention), and followed her out of the tent. Outside they encountered the tall, foreign-looking groom bringing in newly-caparisoned steeds.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he said, touching his cap, "but it is a pity to leave just now. The best of our entertainment is just about to commence."

As he spoke, his keen eyes flashed upon each one of the party, and a thin kind of suppressed smile curved his lips. Haughtily deigning no answer, Mr. Hampton and Mrs. Erlescombe swept by the man. Douglas turned, with his natural courtesy and charming smile, and said: "Thanks. We think we have seen enough for our money, and these ladies are tired."

They walked on, and steadily, as one who intended it, and did what he intended, Clyde Douglas attached himself to the lady-mother for the walk home, and led her on so rapidly that she had not time to cast one backward glance to see what Mr. Hampton and Winnie were doing.

"Has not the circus been just what you expected, Miss Erlescombe?" asked Hampton, looking down at the girl with a sneering kind of triumph.

"I never expected anything about it; what do you mean?" answered she, coldly.

"There is a disappointed expression upon your charming face," chuckled he.

"You must be seeing a reflection of your own," retorted she. "It is horribly hot, I know that, and so dusty."

"Let me hold your sunshade over you,"—trying to take it.

"What good will that be in keeping off the dust? It is a horrid walk, this. I am sure I wish I had not come."

"Shall I call Mr. Douglas back? I am sure he will walk with you, if you ask him."

"I wish you would go on and walk with him and mother; that would be more to the purpose. I could then enjoy myself alone."

"Better than with Douglas?"

"I should very decidedly think so!" said she, emphatically; whereupon his face brightened.

"How long is that young man going to stay here? He has been here six days already, and has been using this house as if it were his own."

"Has he really?" asked she, dreamily. "Six days! Is it so long as that?"

"Will you come on the water with me for an hour or so when we get home, Miss Erlescombe, please?"

"The moment I get home I am going to drink six cups of tea, Mr. Hampton."

"But afterward?—you have not been in a boat with me for so long."

"I can't say what I can do until I have had that tea; after it, perhaps, if I feel refreshed."

"Six cups of tea ought to prove refreshing."

"They ought. Well, perhaps, if I do feel very much refreshed, and nothing more attractive turns up, I may step into a boat with you, Mr. Hampton."

"Thanks!" he said, effusively.

But after the tea had been partaken of, and Mr. Hampton was studying the newspaper, Winifred saw Clyde Douglas standing by the river, looking so handsome, so manly, so *debonair*, in his cool flannel suit, with his cigar in his mouth, that she went across to join him.

"Mr Douglas, you left something behind you in the circus."

"What did I leave?" asked he, surprisedly, turning to her and throwing away his cigar.

"You left me!" she said, smiling, as she clasped her hands demurely before him. "Am not I something?"

He looked at her, as the sun gilded the hair beneath her hat, and lighted up her azure liquid eyes, and fell searchingly upon the pure tinted face that bore its light so well, and a sudden rush of dark coloring rose into his own face.

"Come on the water," he pleaded, stooping to undo the fastening of the boat that was moored against the bank. "Just for an hour or two."

"I don't think my mother would like me to take excursions of an hour or two with young single gentlemen unchaperoned," said she, prudishly. "Besides, unfortunately, I have half-promised to go out in this very boat for half an hour with Mr. Hampton."

"With Hampton! Unchaperoned, of course, with Hampton?"

"Ah, yes. You see he is elderly, and—"

"Preferable, of course, to me. Don't stop what you were going to say."

"I was not going to say that; I only thought it,"—mischievously. "What I was going to say was that he is elderly and safe."

"And I am unsafe?" asked he, eagerly, bending down with his dangerous handsome glance.

"Have you any reason to think you are?" returned she, moving from him as she laughed and colored. "But don't come so near, please."

"I must come near enough to see you. You forget I am a little short sighted. I lost my eye-glass, too, the first day I met you and I never have been really able to see you as you are, I believe"—calmly regarding her.

"You have sustained a very serious loss! How do I look when seen as I am not?" laughed she. "Do you mind telling me?"

"You look the most beautiful woman, save one, that I ever beheld!"

"I see something about you that I have never observed before!" said she, talking quickly, in confusion. "That little gold locket hanging just above your watch-chain! What is in it?" picking it up and opening it before he could check her.

A lovely woman's face was inside—a girl's face, smiling and bright, with golden hair and soft blue eyes, and features sweet and winsome.

"Who is it?" Winnie asked, hastily, looking up with a pang she could not account for, and that suddenly turned her face pale.

"The most beautiful woman I have ever beheld! The only woman I ever loved!" he said, gently taking the locket, and closing it ere he put it out of sight.

There was silence for a moment. Douglas was looking at his companion, but her eyes were fixed on the hurrying, rippling stream. The whole scene—the water and the lawn, the flowers and the sunlight—seemed to have

changed in one brief instant. The beauty of the day seemed to have gone. The air felt chilly. The girl gave a little shiver as she turned and took a step toward the house.

In that moment, however, Mr. and Mrs. Erlescombe appeared; she smiling, as she always smiled upon Mr. Douglas; he looking worried and anxious.

"Mrs. Erlescombe, I appeal to you," said Douglas, meeting the lady; "I am entreating Miss Erlescombe to come on the river for an hour, but she says you would not like it."

"Dear, dutiful child," said the gushing mother, putting her hand on the girl's sleeve; "she is always thinking of what her parents would like or dislike. When you choose a wife, dear Mr. Douglas, take an old woman's advice, and choose a girl who pays her parents the same deference and idolatry she will be obliged to yield to her husband!"

"Mother, what a stupid remark!" cried the dutiful daughter.

"Mr. Douglas knows otherwise," said the lady, with smiles and meaning looks toward her guest. "Take Winnie on the water for an hour? Yes, surely I can trust her to you. Go, dearest, and enjoy yourself with our guest!"—stroking the lace on Winnie's pink dress.

"Thanks, mother; I don't want to! I've half promised to go out with Mr. Hampton!"

"Mr. Hampton is not of the slightest consequence!" said Mrs. Erlescombe, decidedly.

"Oh! is he not?" muttered her lord and master. "He will let you know whether he is not, sooner or later!"

"To show you of how little consequence I consider an engagement with poor old Mr. Hampton (no doubt a well-meaning, useful person, Mr. Douglas, but not in our set, of course—my husband has him here only just on business), I desire my daughter to accept your most delightful offer of rowing her for a short time on this river."

She spoke to the guest, and her face was wreathed with the most delightful of smiles. Winnie understood the tone used, and stepped into the boat without saying another word.

They pulled from shore in silence. When they had got out some distance, Mr. Douglas said, with a smile on his lips, as he leaned across to his companion, "A penny for your thoughts, Miss Erlescombe."

"I don't feel inclined to sell them. Take care of your right oar, Mr. Douglas"—shortly.

"We are going through the bridge."

"Shall we go through the bridge or turn now? Up or down the stream would you prefer?"

"I have no preference. But perhaps we had better turn and go down; it will take shorter time."

"I am sorry you should come out with me to be bored, Miss Erlescombe," observed he, stiffly.

"Oh, never mind; it won't last long, and we all have disagreeable things to do at times," answered she, pleasantly.

"What did you think of that portrait inside my locket?" he inquired, resting upon his oars as he fixed his eyes upon her, and the boat floated slowly down the stream.

"You eulogized it so highly yourself, I scarcely like to give an opinion," replied she, turning aside and dabbling one pretty white hand in the water.

"I said what I thought—that I never saw a face to equal that in sweetness and beauty, but then I am not an unprejudiced judge. You cannot fail to see beauty in a person you have loved for a lifetime with all the depths of devotion your nature is capable of. Can you?"

"I dare say not; I know nothing about that,"—coldly.

"Shall you never know it?" he asked, leaning forward, until his hand touched hers, and his glance thrilled her through and through.

"I wish you would not try to upset the boat," said she, leaning back. "Little as you may believe it, Mr. Douglas, I have no fancy for a ducking this chilly evening."

"If I upset you, I will bring you out," he assured her.

"Thanks; you are very kind, but you could not get me out before all the starch had been taken from my dress, I feel sure."

"Did it strike you that this portrait in my locket was anything like yourself?" he asked, insinuatingly.

"That portrait did not strike me at all. I am very sorry; but it is my nature to speak the truth, Mr. Douglas"—with a little unnatural laugh.

"You remind me so much of her"—musingly. "Every time I look at you I think of her, and that is partly why. Miss Erlescombe, may I confide in you?"—he changed his sentence.

"Oh, do! Nothing makes me laugh like a love-story—nothing amuses me so much!"

"Do you never speak seriously?" he asked, in disappointed accents.

"Usually. I am quite serious now when I say I wish you would row me in to the bank and let me land. I should much prefer to walk home, I am so cold."

"Is that your only reason for leaving me?" asked he, making no attempt to fulfill her request.

"Well, to be candid with you, I just caught a glimpse of Mr. Hampton's long coat waving amid the trees, and I should like to walk home with it."

When she said that, he turned without another word, but with an entire change of countenance, and rowing in to the bank, assisted her to land, with a grave severity of manner that might have amused a looker-on.

"Mr. Hampton, what are you doing?" Winnie cried, tripping after the stiff, thin figure and the professional coat. "What are you doing, Mr. Hampton, I say?"

"I am walking," said he, turning freezingly.

"I see that; but you are doing something else, too, or you would not be too engrossed to notice me. I saw the breeze agitating your coat-tails a moment through the trees, and I insisted upon Mr. Douglas landing me, that I might come and join you. Now, aren't you very pleased to see me?"

She had not calculated upon the effect of that coquettish speech, that upward, mirthful glance, that touch of her hand upon his arm. It sounds incredible, but she did not know how bewitching she was looking that afternoon. She was not quite aware of how well pink satine and a shepherdess hat, all covered with white lace, became her, and she had no idea that this man really cared for her.

She turned, trembling and white, and hot and cold, as her two hands were gathered in his sinewy, close grasp, and his countenance, white, and earnest, and strained, told her the truth in an instant's flash before his hoarse voice spoke.

"Miss Erlescombe—Winnie, I am nearly crazy!"

"Oh, Mr. Hampton, don't you think you are mistaken?"

"I am mad with suspense, and anxiety, and anger! I am being most abominably treated! I was invited down here for the express purpose of marrying you!"

"Marrying me? You? Why, really you must be mad!"

"Is it the thought of a madman? Child, does it so appear to you? Is it too incredible, too revolting an idea for you to grasp?"

"It really is. I don't know anything about revolting; but incredible it really is. Why, you are as old as—I mean, there is nothing in you that I should ever be able to fall in love with! I mean, you are just the kind of man I never should dream of marrying—I never could marry, I mean," stammered the girl, getting more hopelessly entangled at each sentence in her wild confusion and dismay. "I think you are entirely mistaken, Mr. Hampton. The idea of your marrying me never could have entered anybody's head. You can't mean it yourself, really,"—in pathetic, tearful, agonized pleading. "I hope you don't mind my

saying all this? I don't know how to express myself."

"You know how to cut deep enough to cure," he said, in a curious voice. "Do you mean to tell me that you were not in your mother's plot, then, Miss Erlescombe? Now, be truthful!"

"I always am truthful,"—indignantly. "I don't know what you mean by my mother's plot."

"A plan, if you like the term better, to save herself and husband from ruin by your attractions. I see into it easily enough. I came down here, was cajoled by her, flattered by the old man, bewitched by you. But I am a dangerous edged tool to play with. If the kind of thing that has been going on—since this new quarry, this younger rival has appeared on the scene—is carried on much further, I may prove unpleasant. I cannot fathom your mother's design, or rather the sudden turn it has taken. Are you in it now, I want to know?"

He had been holding her hands the whole time he spoke, and she tried in vain to free herself.

"I don't understand you," she faltered, the thought of madness filling her with terror. "Mr. Hampton, let us walk quietly on, and talk of birds—bees—butterflies, etc."—in wild persuasiveness.

"I shall talk on this subject until I have exhausted it," he replied, shortly,—“until, at any rate, my mind is clear upon one point. Winifred, will you marry me?"

"No!" she said, in low, decisive tones.

And her eyes met his gaze as she spoke.

"Why not? State your reasons, if you have any."

"I could never marry a man unless I gave my whole heart with my hand," she said, coloring deeply. "To do otherwise would be to injure him as much as myself, Mr. Hampton; and I would sooner—"

Then some expression in his face struck her, and instantly her own softened, and her sweet eyes filled with tears.

"You are fond of me, I believe," she said, with a sob. "Oh, how wicked I have been never to guess this before! Oh, what can I do to make amends?"

"Marry me!" he said, speaking thickly and low.

But she turned aside, and shook her head.

"You don't believe in my love," he continued, his tones growing more impassioned with each word. "You think because I am old and ugly, because the fire of youth and its attractions are not mine, that the power to love and cherish, the capacity for devotion and worship are gone too. Child, I can love you better than a younger man. The fickleness of youth, the petty exactions, the tyranny of a young man's affection are not to be expected from me. Winifred, won't you be mine?"

She felt that she would sooner die; but she did not express herself carelessly again. The unmistakable suffering in the haggard, gaunt face touched her strangely. She went up to him, and put her soft little hand on his arm.

"Oh, Mr. Hampton!" she whispered—and when he met her tearful gaze he knew that it was no put on sentimentality,—“I am so sorry for the suffering I have unwittingly caused you. Believe me, I never dreamed, I never guessed this or anything like it, whatever my mother's thoughts may have been. I never presumed to fancy that a man like you would think of a girl like me. This is the first offer I have ever had," she declared, piteously; "and if it is to cause pain like this, I hope I may never have another, that is all!"

"Vain hope," he said, slowly, "unless you marry before another man has time to see you. Winifred, marry me, and be safe and at rest from the dangers and misery your beauty will surely bring upon you. For your own sake more than for mine I ask this."

"His brain must surely be a little touched," thought the girl, pitifully, "if he thinks that to save me from misery my best plan is to marry a man I don't at all like!"

Then aloud, "Go home, Mr. Hampton, and forget about me. I am not worth being in your thoughts. I am giddy, weak, stupid, young. I should be no companion for a life like yours. You would regret in one week the foolish step you had taken. I am bad-tempered, frivolous, vain—oh, I assure you, not half as nice as I seem! I have faults by the dozen—quite bad faults!"

"Perhaps; but I love you!" he said, with head turned away, his hands fast clasped on his silk umbrella.

"And I am very, very grateful for your love!" she whispered gently, the tears rising in her eyes again, as a wild memory and a comparison between the figure before her and another one made her heart beat fast, and a realization of the pain she had caused filled her mind with repentance. "I shall never forget the honor you have done me by—by thinking of me thus, and I hope you will still let me be your friend, Mr. Hampton. Dear Mr. Hampton, I would cut off my hand to save you this trouble! Oh, dear, I wish you had never come down here!"

She was too absorbed to hear an approaching footstep. Her eyes were too blinded with tears to see a man who passed them just at that moment, and struck by something in their attitude or demeanor, paused to give a good long stare at either as he passed.

He was a tall, remarkable-looking individual—a kind of mixture between a workingman and a jockey in dress—foreign-looking, and ill-to-do, apparently.

Mr. Hampton was staring hard at the ground with a fixed, stony gaze, when suddenly, without a word, he turned, and swiftly strode away from Winnie, taking his way, apparently without design, amid the little paths through the trees.

Winnie hesitated a moment as to whether she should follow him, then saying to herself, "I can do no good; I can say nothing more than I have said. He does seem a little odd in his mind just now. Perhaps quiet is the best thing for him." And she turned toward home; but as she passed the tree where the stranger man was standing, he came out, and raising his hat, confronted her.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE STORM.

"I DECLARE I am in a state of bewilderment!" said Mr. Erlescombe to his wife, as she sat on the lawn about half an hour after Winnie had been sent off on the river with Clyde Douglas. "I have not a single clear idea in my head!"

"Do you usually have?" inquired his better-half, placidly doubtful.

"If I don't, it is your fault. You pretend to manage my affairs, and you are bringing us all to rack and ruin as quickly as you can do it! Upon my word, I sometimes think you have taken leave of your senses!"

"You do not think I have passed them on to you, I hope?" replied she, contemptuously.

"I insist upon knowing what you are about! We invited Hampton down here for the express purpose of getting him to fall in love with Winnie—"

"Which he has done," interrupted the lady, coolly.

"And now he has done it, you play fast and loose with him—or, rather, only loose! You insult him, treat him with contempt, bring before him this young Douglas, a nice young fellow enough, but, bless my soul—"

"You need not trouble about that. Your blessings won't do it much good!" calmly picking up her stitches.

"Bless my soul, woman, you must have been sent in the world to aggravate men! You send Winnie about with Douglas on purpose to vex Hampton, and there stands Hampton, with my life in his hands, as it were."

"If it were only that—" she began, scornfully.

But he interrupted, working himself up into a passion.

"It is something more—at least, something that touches you, madam, more! He has in his hands the power to make us all beggars tomorrow—to turn us out of house and home at any moment. Every inch of land I possess is mortgaged beyond its value, and Hampton is the mortgagee. Every stick and stone I possess is his when he likes to claim it! He has a bill of sale on our very furniture. Here I stand—"

"I wish you would sit down—standing, brandishing your stick within an inch of my head, and shouting at the top of your voice. I suppose you want the gardener to know that every inch of land you have is mortgaged."

"He and every one else will know it soon enough if you go on as you propose, madam! Here I stand, in the eyes of the world Robert Erlescombe, well-to-do, and influential. In reality, I am Hampton's slave, and he knows it!"

"More shame for you to have acted so, and ruined your wife and sweet, innocent child."

"I ruined you! Your extravagance, woman, has done more than half of it! I told you soon after we were married that if you would not retrench—"

"I did not marry you to retrench. Now, Robert, keep quiet, and I will tell you that I have a plan to lift us out of all your difficulties. You shall be well-to-do and safe yet, if only you won't interfere."

"I must interfere. You said Winnie should marry Hampton."

"My daughter marry that piece of parchment—that bad, inferiorly-bred money broker!"—the speaker rose, with majesty, and swept about on the lawn—"never, Robert. I have not sunk low enough for that! Sacrifice our sweet child's happiness—the life-happiness of our only child—to a man whom she could never love—to a man whom really I don't consider a gentleman? Once, and for all, it shall not be! Beauty and parchment shall not be allied; youth and vicious age shall not be united with my consent. Pah! the very idea of that shriveled, ugly stick for a son-in-law makes me sick!"

"He will be a downright ugly stick to turn against you," said the husband, fearfully. "And he will turn sharp enough if he thinks all is not going to be as he has been reckoning upon. It is all very well to consider your prejudices and Winnie's feelings, but, my love, be cautious. Hampton—"

"Leave him to me. I happen to have discovered a little something about Mr. Hampton just lately," said the lady, triumphantly—"a something which makes me abhor the very idea of his claiming my daughter—a something he little suspects any creature knows but himself. Ha, ha! Mr. Hampton, appearances are very smooth indeed, but I know a something!"

"A something against him?" asked Earlescombe, eagerly. "My dear love, if you know anything against the man in any shape or way, tell it to me, and I will make use of it. Now, confide in me!" persuasively. "It requires a man's brain to manage these matters. You have found out something disparaging to Hampton?"—coming gleefully close.

"Yes; which I am going to keep to myself, too, until the proper time comes for making use of it,"—coldly moving away.

"Was there ever a being so aggravating as a woman?" striking his stick into the ground. "You have got a decent card in your hand, you say, and you'll play it so badly, all for want of a little decent advice, that we shall lose the game."

"We shall not lose the game if I don't allow you to meddle with it," said she, tranquilly counting the stitches of her pattern. "I have got a handful of good cards, and I shall play them as I think best. I really consider, Robert, when I think it over, that we have lowered ourselves by touching the money of a man like Hampton. He must be paid off, that is what must be done to him—paid off, and forbidden to set foot in this house again!"

"I should like to do the latter thing," muttered Erlescombe. "But how will you arrange the former, my dear?"

Mrs. Erlescombe rose, grasped her fancy work, looked all around in an impressive way, put her finger to her lips, and then putting them close to her husband's ear, announced: "That is a millionaire after Winnie."

"Hampton is a millionaire?"

"Hampton is a dunce. That Mr. Douglas is a millionaire in disguise, Robert, dear. Oh, you need not stare in that foolish way! I am never mistaken, nor deceived. He is as rich as Croesus, and he is falling madly in love with the child. Of course when he marries, it will be a pleasure to him to pay off his father-in-law's debts; a trifle to him, too, if his wealth is half what I have reason to believe. It will soon be arranged when the rival is taken out of the road, and that horrid snail, Hampton, shall have every cent of his money, never fear!"—waving her needle contemptuously.

"The horrid snail is very relieved to hear it!" said Mr. Hampton, stepping out from the shrubbery behind them, with a dangerous expression upon his countenance. "He had begun to fear that, do the best he could for himself, he would be obliged to lose something by the rascally way he has been duped and taken in here. You will perhaps prove your kindly assertion at your earliest convenience, madam. I am disinclined to wait longer for a single cent of what your husband owes me. It shall be paid!"

"You have been listening?" cried the lady, rising with a kind of a shriek, and brandishing her work in her husband's face. "Robert, you idiot! you always do talk so disgustingly loud!"

"Whether I have been listening or not is immaterial. I have heard every word of your opinions respecting me, madam, and I have formed my own resolutions accordingly. One question, though, I will trouble you to answer me; and that is, what is the something you have lately discovered against my character which renders me, in your eyes, an unfit person to claim the daughter you were only too anxious I should woo and win a week ago."

"In your room there stands a little brass box," said Mrs. Erlescombe, significantly, too infuriated to weigh her words or their consequence, "and in that box a packet of letters lie!"

But she trembled as she saw the change that passed over his face. It went from white to a kind of ashen green, and for a moment his passion was too great to allow him to speak.

"Letters which you have read, madam!" he hissed, at length. "I thank you for informing me of the way you understand the duties of a hostess—the mean, dishonorable, criminal opening of private boxes and peering into private matters that you indulge in at your guest's expense! I shall know how to treat you now. But for this little matter I might, by some foolish pity or leniency of thought toward you as a woman, have mitigated some of the punishment you deserve. You have done away with that risk."

"I have found out how you treat a woman! I happily found out in time to save my own innocent, trustful child from the fate the writer of those letters underwent at your barbarous hands! I don't care a scrap for you, Mr. Hampton, grand as you think yourself, and in a rage as I know you are! I don't care a pin for you! Bring me into court if you like, and let the whole thing be heard, and those letters read, and hear whether the court will side with me or you! Ha, ha!"

"I knew that Earlescombe, here, married considerably beneath himself when he married you!" retorted the broker, with a little sarcasm. "I never mistook you for a lady, and had reason to believe you were about as low by birth as his friends accused you of being; but I never sympathized with his friends in their righteous vexation at his *mesalliance*, or pitied him for his own folly, until now."

"Leave my presence!" shrieked the lady. "Go out of my house and grounds, Hampton, and take your money with you if you like! I would rather be sold out than subjected to this from a snail like you; and there you stand, coward!" (firing upon her husband), "with no word to say for your legal wife—no stone to hurl at the man who dares to insult her before your eyes!"

"He will have enough to say presently upon another subject," observed Hampton, quietly. "You shall have official notice, Erlescombe, of the course I mean to pursue, without any painful delay, I assure you."

"Don't take any notice of her!" Mr. Erlescombe came round to the infuriated man and put a shaking hand on his arm. "Don't ruin me, there's a good fellow, just because she is out of her senses! Upon my word, I am afraid of her often; I think she has a little lunacy about her. I rue the day I married her, I can tell you!" in a piteous whisper. "Don't ruin me and Winnie because she is a chattering vi-rago. We have nothing to do with her plans, I swear. We want you to marry Winnie."

"In proof of which assertion, your daughter has just unqualifiedly refused me!" said Hampton, distinctly.

"My daughter refuses a low, vicious money broker. Of course, my daughter knows what is just to her parents and her bringing up," observed Mrs. Erlescombe, tranquilly. "Ah, yes! I can trust my daughter in any strait!"

"You shall be in a strait presently that shall try your bringing up to the utmost, I can promise you!" uttered Hampton, trembling with rage.

"Take me to the house, Robert," said the foolish woman, turning to her husband, affectedly. "This vulgarity makes me feel faint. Take me to my smelling-bottle."

"I would advise you to make the most of your house and your smelling-bottle while you have it!" sneered the other. "You won't have anything to call your own much longer, you may rely upon that."

Just at that moment Winnie came tripping toward them. Her hat was swinging in her hand, her brown hair ruffled by the breeze; her eyes sparkling, her cheeks glowing; her whole air and bearing too full of some secret happiness to allow her to notice anything peculiar in the countenances of the group she interrupted.

Catching Mr. Hampton by the arm, she drew him just a few paces aside, and said, eagerly, "Mr. Hampton, I have a message for you from an acquaintance of yours, who asked me to give it to you without a moment's delay. He said it was of immediate importance, and I was to give it you in just these words:—'Your dear old friend, Mrs. Barnes, has come back from England, and would be very glad to see you if you would call upon her as early as possible at 62 Eightieth street, Harlem.' I took particular note of the address. The man said she did not know yours, or she would have written to you, or called on you herself; but she would be unfeignedly glad to see you for the sake of auld lang syne. Oh! and he said that in case you might have forgotten the old lady's identity, it would bring her to your recollection to remind you that she had a niece called Rhoda. She is so anxious to see you now she has come back from England that she has employed this man to look for you. By mere chance he saw you in the circus, and half-recognized you there. Then he saw you to-day, but you went off so suddenly that he could not overtake you, so was obliged to ask me to take the message for him. Now, was there ever a long message remembered so exactly, and delivered so correctly?"

Was there ever a message received so strangely? Mr. Hampton's features went back to the ashen green they had taken when speaking to his hostess a little time ago; his eyes glared at Winnie, and he threw her from him ere the last words had left her lips.

"You did well to call yourself weak and stupid!" he muttered. "To aid and abet your mother, to provoke a lion already roused; to

put the last straw on a man whose temper has broken, is weak and stupid indeed! So you are in it, too! Well, then, my last grain of compunction has vanished!"

With that, he turned and left the astonished girl, and went straight to consult a railway guide.

CHAPTER V.

THROUGH THE WOOD.

THE man came forth from behind a tree, and confronted Miss Erlescombe as Mr. Hampton left her.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said. And Winnie gave a little start.

She was agitated and confused, pained and unhappy.

It was excessively lonely there; and the stranger's countenance, although it brought some half-memory to her mind, was not one that, seen closely, was calculated to inspire a timid mind with confidence. It was handsome, but dissipated and sinister-looking when, as now, it tried to conjure up an agreeable smile; and the eyes—dark, keen, and peculiar—although they were noting every change in Winnie's countenance, were carefully avoiding her glance.

"Do you want anything?" the girl asked, nervously.

"I am only bold enough to inquire, miss, if the gentleman who has just parted from you calls himself Douglas, by any chance?" said the man, with a respectful tone that was quite humble.

"Douglas?" repeated she, coloring, and speaking without thought. "No; that is Mr. Hampton."

"Hampton—Hampton—um! You think that is his right name, miss?"

"Why would he be likely to call himself by a wrong one?" she replied, surprisedly.

"Not at all—not at all. I only want to be quite sure that he is the Mr. Hampton I am wanting to find. I have something to communicate to his advantage, miss. Why, I have been looking for him for months."

"To his advantage! Are you one of those odd advertisement?"

"I am not an advertisement, miss. I am an honest, plain man, as you see; but"—suddenly putting on an air of confidence—"I am from one of those offices that put advertisements in the papers, sure enough, such as you allude to, miss. 'If so-and-so will communicate with so-and-so, he will hear of something to his advantage;' or, 'if H. B. will return to his disconsolate widow all will be forgiven;' and so on. You are very discerning, miss, to see a man's calling so quick. It is not often folks, ladies especially, will believe in us and trust us, so we often fail by those means to do the good we might wish to do," meekly.

"You look so odd," said Winnie, very pleased with her credit for discernment. "I thought you must belong to something queer like that. By-the-by, though," becoming suddenly suspicious, "I have seen you before. Now I recollect, were you not at the circus the other day, doing something with the horses?" she questioned, sternly.

"I was, miss," he said, apologetically. "It was a demeaning and a lowering thing to do, but in our profession we often have to descend to those subterfuges in the way of business. I never stick at anything in the pursuit of business, miss. So that was Mr. Hampton sitting beside you in the reserved-seats that day. Oh, dear, if I had only guessed it, what time it might have saved me, and what pleasure given him! I never dreamed of his being in this neighborhood, and that is the truth. Now, it is very unfortunate, here am I telegraphed for up by our chief office—on my way to the station now, miss—can't spare a moment, and there is Mr. Hampton gone away through the wood, we don't know where, and here am I holding a message for him that it will just take a load from his heart to hear, the message of all others that will brighten his spirits (he

looked dull, I noticed. Ah! we judge expressions rapidly—obliged to, miss; quite a simple—ordinary message, too, such as you or any friend could deliver."

"Why did you ask me first if his name was Douglas?" interrupted Winnie, curiously.

"Why, miss? Ah! I could not tell why I do a great many things. In our profession we can't just speak as we would like. There is a Mr. Douglas staying at your house, miss, I've been told, but you, of course, don't know much about his business."

He spoke in a manner which a more experienced person than Winnie might have thought too careless.

Miss Erlescombe made a haughty movement of her dainty little head.

"I am not Mr. Douglas's business agent," said she.

"Pardon," said the man; then drawing out his watch, "I must be going; I shall have a run for this train." Then turning as by a striking thought, "You could not, miss, I suppose (I am ashamed to trouble you like this), tell me of a trustworthy messenger I could give my message to take now to Mr. Hampton. When we are pressed for time, we often have to employ outside hands like that."

Take a load from his mind!—brighten him up wonderfully!

Impulsive Winifred turned with only that thought in her mind. Her heart ached for Mr. Hampton, and she wished that her hands could carry him a little meed of consolation.

"If you are sure it is a message that will please him, I will deliver it to Mr. Hampton with the greatest willingness myself," said she. "I shall see him probably again in less than half an hour."

Inexperienced, trusting, nineteen-year-old Winnie! she never noticed, as the man overwhelmed her with thanks and then slowly and emphatically retailed the lengthy message to her, his evil smile, his tone of self-congratulation, his manner as though he had just gained the very thing he wanted. It sounded a pleasant enough message, and not until she had repeated it to Mr. Hampton and the storm it raised had overwhelmed her, did she doubt one word of the stranger's plausible tale.

Inexperienced Winnie, indeed! She walked slowly toward home after she had parted from the man, but ere she entered her own grounds a voice arrested her, a voice whose deep, pleasant melody thrilled her every pulse.

"So you are not traveling home with Hampton's coat after all, Miss Erlescombe," said Clyde Douglas.

"I walked a little way with it," said she. "You see it got on ahead, and I am following it."

"You left me under false pretenses, I consider."

"Oh, no! I thought you quite understood that I really left you because I was tired of your society, Mr. Douglas."

"Of course it is an easy thing to understand that," he muttered. "Miss Erlescombe, do you express yourself with this lovely candor to all your friends? You must have a great crowd of them, I should say."

"I don't want a great crowd of false friends and flatterers," said she, bitterly, her head turned away so that he could not see her expression. "I never pretend myself to like anybody I don't really care for, and I wish people that don't care for me would be honest enough to say so at once, and not consider that politeness demands from them a whole heap of meaningless attentions, just because they are staying in the same house!" vehemently.

"Are there people who, after once knowing you, can manage to care not a particle for you?" he asked, quietly; and though she would not meet it, she felt his dark thrilling gaze through her every nerve.

"There are certainly people who pay a lot of meaningless attentions just because—oh, well, I suppose it is because they are staying in the same house with one; I can't see any other reason for it."

"You allude to Mr. Hampton, perhaps?"

"No, I most certainly do not allude to Mr. Hampton. I think he means what he says, at any rate. I like Mr. Hampton."

"That is quite an unnecessary assertion. That is one of the things that goes without saying," returned he, stiffly.

"I mean I like him a great deal better than I do you."

His face changed a little; but he answered, sarcastically:

"Anybody who runs may read that, Miss Erlescombe. Don't trouble to make conversation for me in this way, thanks."

"He is always gentlemanly and considerate, and never thinks of teasing me with sarcasm!" said she, her voice trembling.

"Suppose we agree that he is perfection, won't that simplify things?" suggested he, with a careless laugh.

"He might easily be perfection in comparison with you; for I do think, Mr. Douglas,"—turning upon him with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes—"you are the most aggravating, horrid man I ever did come across!"

"Thanks, awfully. It is so nice to reflect that just now you assured me that you never said a thing you did not mean."

"I don't care. You are the most irritating, disagreeable person I was ever obliged to walk with. I declare you are!"

"You are not obliged to walk with me," retorted he. "I left the boat up there because I was tired of pulling it about alone, and I thought a solitary walk might change the current of my thoughts; but I am sure I have no wish to intrude. I will wait here until you get ten minutes' or so start, then I will follow without intruding upon your lonely ramble."

"Don't be absurd!"

"I am hardly in good enough spirits to be absurd, I fancy,"—shortly.

"Are you not in good spirits? I am sure you seem frightfully gay and loquacious."

"Loquacious one may be, and outwardly gay; but"—speaking slowly, and with a tone in his voice that she had never heard before—"when the person a man likes best in the world, the only person in whose good opinion he cares about standing, has, with a great deal of unnecessary candor and pains, taken the trouble to make him understand how thoroughly she dislikes him, he can scarcely just then be expected to be in very good spirits."

She met his quiet, earnest glance just for a moment; then, turning away, colored wildly, and plucked at the foliage as she passed it.

"I can't understand about all these people you like best in the world, and consider loveliest, and have loved with depths of devotion for years. They get mixed up in my mind, and puzzle me. Oh, dear! I wish men could be understood!"

"I should like to understand one woman," he said, gently—"only one!"

"The lady in the locket, I suppose! Can't you fathom her? That is hard, really, after depths of devotion for years!"—with a little miserable laugh.

"She never puzzled me," he answered, gravely. "She never scorned my devotion, nor hurt my feelings, nor willfully misunderstood what I felt and meant. She was never sweet and kind one moment, and cold as ice and snubbing the next. She never tortured for the sake of giving pain, and laughed at suffering that she could not understand; and she would have sympathized and pitied, even if she could not have relieved, pain that she herself had caused!"

"Would she, indeed? I expect she must be perfect."

"I think she was perfect."

"Then I can't think why in the world you don't stay with her!" cried the girl, pricked on by the stabs of a jealousy too great to bear.

"I am sure perfect people are not so common that you can afford to treat one lightly when you have been lucky enough to find her. To leave a perfect person for a few days' fishing seems to me too ungrateful; and I am sure, if I

were the perfect person, I should expect to be treated with a little more consideration."

"I have not left her—she left me," he cried, in low, grave accents. "She is dead, Miss Erlescombe!"

"Dead! Oh, Mr. Douglas, I never thought!"—turning swift repentant eyes from him.

He bent his head, and his glance met hers as he added, "She is dead, and she was my mother, Miss Erlescombe!"

They were just passing through the shrubbery that adjoined the lawn at Elm Grove, and the long shadows were really enveloping the short green grass; but it seemed to Winnie suddenly as if a storm had swept in the blackest darkness from the sky, and the sun in its fullest might had shone forth after a year's eclipse.

Mr. and Mrs. Erlescombe and Mr. Hampton were standing on the lawn with expressions which Douglas saw instantly were significant of anything but what was pleasant. Winnie ran from her companion, who would have avoided the lawn, and seizing Mr. Hampton's arm, drew him aside, as has been already said, to tell her innocent message. But she was too engrossed by her own gleam of bliss to comprehend what had happened.

"We are ruined!" said Mr. Erlescombe, sitting down and turning pale and heated. "Trust a woman to clinch matters! You have done it now, my love. We are ruined, ruined, ruined!"

"Done what?—what does he mean?" asked the girl, wondering.

"Does he ever know what he means?" said the wife, who understood him.

"Winnie, love, pardon my asking a home-question," drawing the girl aside; "but your dear father is a little excited about your settlement in life. He wanted you to marry Mr. Hampton; but I—ah! dear me. I was a maiden once, and understand those blushes. There is a some one nearer and dearer, is there not, sweet love?"

"Oh, mother," said the girl, hiding her face on her mother's shoulder, "I don't know. I—I—"

"We know nothing about him," soliloquized the mother, softly; "but there is nobility stamped on that countenance. Poor he may be, and probably is; but there is wealth of mind, my child, that I can appreciate. Your poor father, he is sordid and weak, but I urge you to let this young man speak out his heart, and I shall not say him nay; neither will you, pussy, eh?"

"Oh, mother, I don't know that he wants any nay or anything else said to him. I don't know that he cares one atom for me! I mean he has never said—I mean—"

"You mean that he does not intend to ask you to marry him?" hissed the lady, anxiously. "My dear, if he does not he is a rascal—a base deceiver! Winnie, I command you to encourage him in every way in your power to propose. If he does not within four days he shall be turned out of this house, and you shall never see him again! Now, mark that!"

CHAPTER VI.

RUIN AND DISGRACE.

THE dinner-table was covered with plate, and glass, and flowers, and costly wines and viands. A footman and a butler, in livery, waited upon the four diners.

Mrs. Erlescombe rustled in moire, and her diamonds flashed in the light. Winnie was clad simply in Indian muslin, but she wore pearls that had cost no little sum. Inside the room and outside, where, through the open window, the gardens lay in the twilight, there was every evidence of taste, and aristocracy, and wealth. Across the hall, the luxurious drawing-room was lighted by the soft, becoming illumination of countless wax candles.

It was a pleasant house for a young man like Clyde Douglas to stay in, and it was nicer now that Mr. Hampton had left it.

"I see two men coming up the drive," said Winnie, who sat opposite the window—"two

such peculiar looking men, papa. What can they want at this time of day? And they are coming to the front door, too, I declare!"

Mr. Erlescombe turned a little pale and started. He had been given to doing that since Mr. Hampton had left his house suddenly. He got up now, murmuring some excuse, and went into the hall, as an altercation between the genteel footman and the visitors grew loud.

"I have come at this time of day to make it as private as I can," one gruff, strange voice was heard saying, "and we'll make it as quiet for you all as we can—if you—smart young chap you are, to be sure!"—surveying the butler—"treat us like gentlemen. But business is business. Mr. Erlescombe,"—approaching the dining-room door, and thrusting a paper into the master of the house's shaking hand,— "you understand what that means. I've come to take an inventory."

"Insolent knave, what is the meaning of this?" cried Mrs. Erlescombe, leaving her seat, and sweeping toward the speaker. "This is some vile insult of Mr. Hampton's! Leave the house at once, or my servants shall eject you!"

"I should like to see your fine servants put a finger upon me!" sneered the man. "You need not agitate yourself like that, ma'am. I dare say you have had creditors in your house before. Anyhow, it won't be the last time, if all they say is true; so get used to it; and if you treat us politely we will do the same to you. That is honest enough, now, come!"

"It is some absurd practical joke," explained the lady, turning to Douglas. "Take these men to the kitchen,"—turning to the footman, who looked very much inclined to give notice on the spot,— "and come back and finish your dinner, Robert. You can draw a check for whatever they want after dinner, and send them away!"—grandly.

"I shall never draw another check as long as I live!" wailed the poor, weak man, too stricken down to obey his wife. "I shall die under this! I, who have lived honored and respected, and my ancestors before me, in this old home, to see every stick and stone sold from under me!—I, Robert Erlescombe, a pauper, with not even a chair to call my own! Well, well, it has come at last, and perhaps 'tis best so. One can but sink under it. We must all die some time, and I am better gone now. I shall not be missed. I have ruined my innocent child, and the sooner I am out of her way the happier for her!"

Clyde Douglas was looking at Winifred, who had risen when first her father broke forth, and stood for a moment, white and trembling and half-dazed. She went round, and tenderly and with most loving touch put her hands on the old man's shoulders and drew his gray head on her breast.

"Father, darling," she said, softly, "you will break my heart if you talk like that. Look up, dear. I dare say it won't be as bad as you think."

"Worse, worse, worse!" groaned he. "I have known of this for long; I had no right to keep it from you, but your mother— Well, never mind. We stand here, three penniless paupers."

"We stand here together," said the girl, bravely, "and we can never be quite poor so long as we have each other's affection, each other's sympathy and help. Darling, you are crushed by this now, but we will soon see a brighter side to it. We have health, and I have strength and youth. I will work for you father, dear."

"Everything must go—every stick and bit—jewels, clothes, house, everything—and then it won't be all paid; I shall still be a debtor as well as a pauper. The workhouse is the only place for me now, Winnie—the workhouse for a few days, and then death!"

She grew a little whiter, but her clasp around him grew stronger and warmer.

"Never the workhouse for you, dearest, so long as your child has got hands to work or a brain to think! We will leave this house and

the jewels,"—taking off her pearls, and laying them on the table—"and all the things that do not really make happiness. We will give everything up, and you and I, dear, and mother shall go away and live in a tiny cottage somewhere, honestly. That is the road toward happiness; and we shall be taken care of, never fear, darling. Let us try to pay all, and do our best. Father, dear,"—with a sudden tremble in her brave tones, and a lowering of her bright head on his,— "if there is anything I can do for you, tell me, and I'll do it."

"You can give over this insane, exaggerating tragedy," said the lady-mother, stepping forward. "Really, I declare it makes me sick. You must be hard up, indeed, for a pleasing sensation, I think, to make this fuss out of an unimportant mistake like this. Mr. Douglas, I assure you that is all it is. Winnie and her father are so excitable. They are always getting up scenes of this kind. They worry me to death. Would you take the child out into the garden, and calm her?"—turning, sweetly, to the young man—"she takes such notice of every word you say—and leave the poor creature to me," contemptuously touching her ruined husband; "I know how to manage him."

"Let me stay with him," implored Winnie, tightening her clasp upon his neck again.

"You shall not stay with him! You will soon have him out of his mind (such as he has got) if you go on in this ridiculous, most uncalled-for, revolting way! Go out into the fresh air, child, and become calm."

She took her forcibly by the arm as she spoke, and pushed her through the window; and Winnie, who had never disobeyed her mother in her life, with a choked sob, went out, and Douglas followed her into the calm, balmy air.

For a few moments they stood side by side in silence under the stars, with the scents from the flowers rising up sweet and strong around them, and a faint, contented twittering from the sleepy birds in the shrubbery the only sound to break the night's stillness.

"Mr. Douglas," began the girl, as they slowly crossed the lawn, "tell me how best I can earn money, will you, quickly. You see I am only a girl, and inexperienced and young, I am sorry to say, but I have been well educated, and I think I pick up things pretty quickly. Now, would it be best to become some kind of clerk or a book-keeper, school-mistress or music-teacher? I hate teaching, but that does not matter. I have always understood fancy-work pays abominably, and I have not it in me to write books or music. I might paint on china, but would that earn my living, do you think?"

"You earn a living in this cruel, wicked world!" he said, gently. "Miss Erlescombe, is it really so bad as you and your father say?"

"It really is! I have heard hints of the kind before, but though I took no notice of them, so that it all came upon me with a shock to-night, I know it is true! We are ruined—hopelessly!" with a little kind of a sob.

"Miss Erlescombe, when I saw you just now, I thought—"

"Well? Something complimentary, I hope?"—trying to turn with her old brightness as he paused.

"Dare I tell you? I am glad that this thing has fallen upon you! Come into this walk here,"—taking her hand.

"Well, that is a kind thing to say, I must observe. I shall not come into this walk here—nasty damp place! I don't want a cold in addition to—to everything! You are glad that I am wret—wretched! Well, that does sound like a true friend, I must say! That does sound nice!"

"It sounds dastardly, mean, selfish; but so it is! I have been making up my mind to go away to-morrow—to leave you, never to see you again!"

"Oh, don't let me disturb your mind," cried she, with another little sob, which she tried

proudly to swallow. "This won't be a pleasant house to stay in now, I know. But you need not have waited for this excuse to tear yourself away. The moment you had become tired of your visit we would have let you go."

"Oh, what a blind child it is!" he said. He had never relinquished her hand, and now he gathered up the other little soft one, holding them both close and firmly against his heart. "Winnie, do you believe in love or pride?"

"I am sure I don't know what I believe in!"—shortly. "I don't believe in having my hands held when I want to use them; it—it is most inconvenient."

"Do you believe in a love so strong that, short as has been its growth, you know it is part of your life forevermore, strive to flee from it as you may? Do you believe in a pride so strong that because you are poor, and the object of your love is rich—because you are low-born, and she is not, you would die sooner than ask from her the boon you covet above everything this world can give? Can you imagine what it is for such love, after days of wretched strife, suddenly to find the obstacles removed, the object brought down to the level where it may be won?"

She trembled as his words came thick and fast. She did not answer.

"Winnie, now if a man, poor as yourself, but loving you with a might and devotion no earthly change can change, offers you such home as he has got, asks you to allow him to work for you, and guard you and cherish you, to take care of your parents also—though he has only what he earns, it would be enough to save you from the toil you propose—and that with your happiness for an incentive, he would go higher and do better and more than he has cared to do when only his own wants were in question, how should you answer him?"

She looked up suddenly, her sweet, starry eyes meeting his clearly and solemnly, her voice thrilled and low:

"If he were the man I loved, and he came to me when he would with the news that he loved me, rich or poor, oh, Clyde, do you think that would matter? If he came with his love and asked for mine, I would give it him gladly, unsparingly, wholly. I would rather he had come to me when I was rich, because then I should have seemed to have more to give; but if it was his will to come only to me in poverty, then a thousand, thousand times I should bless and thank the stroke that had taken from me money to give me—love!"

Her tones in their deep, heartfelt earnestness almost failed in the last syllables. Her glance fell as the sweet sensitive color flooded her face, and in confusion at the impulse that had carried her out of herself, she hid it upon the hands he held.

"My darling!" he said in a wild passion of delight.

And then the first lover's kiss they had ever known fell on Winnie's lips.

"Mother," she said, coming shyly into the drawing-room a little while afterward, "we have—we have something to tell you."

Mrs. Erlescombe was sitting in the light from the wax candles with an anxious look on her face which took from it all its beauty; but when Winifred's tell-tale voice spoke, she rose with a sudden beaming smile, and extending her arms as if for an embrace, murmured, "My children, do I guess the truth?"

"I have asked Winnie to do me the honor of marrying me," said the young man, simply. "She has promised to be my wife if her parents will give their consent."

"For their darling's happiness what would they not give?" murmured the parent. "I have put my poor husband to bed—he was ill; but, coy ones, I can promise you everything you require."

"But before I ask from either you or her a promise," continued Douglas, gravely, "it is only right that I should tell you something which may affect your decision. I am not wholly what I seem."

"Indeed!"—in beaming affected surprise;

adding to herself, with a chuckle, "Now it is coming out."

"Though I pass by the name of Clyde Douglas, it is not the name to which I have a right. It is, as you may say, a fancy one I have given myself."

"Now, how interesting!"—looking almost too radiant, and smoothing her *moire* flounces. "Winnie, dearest, come hither and listen."

"And what are you by profession, dear Mr. Douglas? Of course now you have no secrets from your future wife and her mother. Of course it is of no importance what you are"—airily. "I see you, and that is sufficient; but still we should like to hear all about you—everything, I mean, that you care to tell."

"I am a clerk in a merchant's office," said the young man, stepping forward, and leaning one hand upon a chair, looking manly, handsome, and noble, more like a prince than a clerk. "I am a clerk with a salary of only twelve hundred a year at present; but I have every prospect of a rise. My employers, I believe, are satisfied with me; and for Winnie"—turning to her with a smile—"I shall work harder than I could do for myself."

Winnie stole up and put a hand through his, while her mother sat smiling, though the smile had become a little fixed.

Douglas continued:

"My father was a wealthy man and a scoundrel. I do not know his name, and I have never seen his face! My mother was by nature a lady, by occupation a dressmaker."

He paused and looked at Mrs. Erlescombe a moment; then went on:

"My father married her privately, and to please him she kept it secret and bore the scorn of her friends and the loss of her home uncomplainingly. He left her before I was born. She had as hard a life as any a woman could have thrust upon her. Unkindly treated and deserted by the man she loved, and for whom she had given up everything, looked down upon by her friends, with a child as well as herself to support, she toiled night and day uncomplaining until her body, not her spirit, gave way. She taught me what a perfect woman was, and then she died broken-hearted—slain, I say" (his deep tones growing harder and slower), "by the scoundrel who had sworn to love and cherish her. After her death a strange thing happened for me. An unknown hand, with money in it, came forward and put me in college (at Yale, of all places, where I learned gentlemanly tastes and associations), clothed, fed, and paid for me until I was twenty, when it suddenly disappeared, and then I stood alone to earn my own living and fight my own battles."

"So far I have done the former honestly and the latter successfully. I have tried to discover, but failed, the hand to which I am indebted for the education I value more highly than I should do a mint of money."

As he ceased speaking there was no sound but a kind of gasp from Mrs. Erlescombe. She was trying to speak, but could not. She stood up, supporting herself by the table, and then she managed to hiss forth:

"Young man, is this the truth?"

"Every syllable of it, I solemnly swear!" he replied, earnestly.

"And the whole truth?" her voice rising to an unpleasant scream, reminding one of peacocks.

"The whole truth as far as I know it!"

"Then," she said, rustling suddenly in her pockets, and bringing forth an eyeglass, "whose is this? What is the meaning of this, please?"

"This!" said he in surprise. "Why, I lost this ages ago—the first day I came here, I believe!"

"You believe rightly. What is there on it, pray?"

"On it? I never noticed anything. Oh, I see, initials and a coat of arms. Now where did I get it? I remember I got it from Claude Dunhaven. We were great friends at Yale—we are friends now."

"And Mr. Dunhaven"—her voice was scarcely a whisper—"was not he coming here *incog.* for fishing?"

"Ah, he was—he was coming for a few days, but his sister's death interfered with his plans, and I came alone."

"Then you may go back alone!" Mrs. Erlescombe hesitating a moment whether to faint or become violent, decided upon the latter. "You are not wanted here—I can tell you that, young man, being what *you are*! And if you think I am going to allow my daughter to marry a man with antecedents like yours, you are very much mistaken, that is all! We don't want you here any more. You are *low*! Perhaps you'll go!"

"Mother," ejaculated Winnie, turning a deathly face and imploring eyes, "you said just now—"

"Silence, miss! I say what I please in my own house!"

"You will, perhaps, permit me to remark that you contradict yourself rather flatly," said Douglas, with lips that had turned white, but which smiled sarcastically. "The difference between your gushing reception of me just now and your present insults, scarcely springs, I take it, from the simple tale I have just told you."

"Never you mind what it springs from!" Mrs. Erlescombe's manners, which had been carefully acquired, were apt to lose their polish under strong excitement. "You just take yourself off, and make room for your betters, will you?—or I shall ring for the servant to pack you off! I will have you taken up for pretending to be what you are not!"

"Mother," cried Winifred, boldly, "you are forgetting that you are a lady, I think!"

"Is it possible to forget a fact never in existence?" soliloquized the young man, quietly.

"Silence, minx!" shrieked the mother. "Mr. Douglas, how you can stay in a place where you are ordered out, passes my comprehension! It is a habit you have inherited from your low mother, the dressmaker, I suppose!"

"Woman, beware!" he hissed, facing her sternly. "Use what ladylike language you like to me, but dare say one syllable against a woman whose name you are not worthy to breathe, and you will see what I am like when roused!"

"I see what you are like when not roused—a pushing, common, insulting vagabond; and I wish you would be roused enough to take yourself away from folks who are sick of you!"

With a silent bow, he went out of the room, and Winnie followed him.

"Miss, come back!" her mother said. But for once she did not heed.

"Clyde," she said, clinging to his arm, and meeting his somewhat cold glance with her heart in hers, "what is going to happen I don't know; but believe this, my darling, believe this through everything—that I love you with every bit of heart I have got, and I shall love you only—you always, you alone, oh, my love, my darling!—through life, be it long or short!"

He did not answer, but his gaze softened as he met her eyes, and he put his hands on hers.

Just then a servant was crossing the hall, and Mrs. Erlescombe came hurrying out from the drawing-room.

"You can pack up my things and send them to the west-end!"

Douglas turned to the servant; then, shaking the little hand that clung to him, with another stately, graceful bow, he quitted the house.

As he walked silently and swiftly along down the road which led from Elm Grove to Blyton, he passed a man standing under a tree, apparently waiting for some one; a man, tall, foreign, and remarkable-looking, who, when he saw Douglas, gave his hat a touch and approached him.

"Do you want anything?" Douglas asked impatiently, presumably because the man was standing full in his way, and made no sign of getting out of it.

"I want a little conversation with you, Mr. Douglas."

"Then you can't have it. I am engaged just now."

"You are only engaged in walking down this road, as far as I see. I will take a turn with you, and we can talk as we go," said the man pleasantly.

"I tell you"—more impatiently—"I am in no mood for gossip. I have other things to think of just now."

"Whatever you may have to think of, I'll bet you a hundred to one that your thoughts give first place to my gossip, as you term it," said the man impressively, "when you've had the luck to hear it."

"Out with it, then, without any more preamble,"—irritably.

"You'll permit me to ask you a question first, perhaps, Mr. Douglas. When did you see your father last?"

Haughtily, the young man turned, and looked at him without a word. Nowise daunted, the stranger chuckled and said: "Shall you know me again when you see me?—have you seen me before, think you?"

"I think I have. You were a kind of under-groom at the circus the other day."

"Well, you don't state a case as pleasantly as might be, but I was giving my valuable services to that circus for a day, which little incident proves to anybody versed in the readings of the times that I (being *unquest onably* born for higher things) must have been a little hard up. Now, being hard up the other day, it is only natural to suppose that I am not as rich as I could wish to be to-day, and so if there is anything about me anybody wishes to buy, now is the time to buy it cheap. About me there is a something that you, Clyde Douglas, would do well to buy for any sum it is in your power to raise—information, past, present, and future about your father."

"Prove your words," said the young man laconically, keeping his searching gaze upon the man.

"For nothing? I thank you, I am not so hard up for brains as that. For a ten-dollar bill now, ridiculous small sum, I'll give you enough information—genuine thing, no deception—to put you into the way of claiming the name you've a right to. I'll restore you to your parent."

"If you can give me such information as I shall esteem genuine and useful in discovering my parentage, I will pay you ten dollars after I have proved its worth," said Douglas quietly.

"Done with you!" said the man, bringing forth a greasy book and a knowing-looking pencil. "For ten dollars I'll put you in the way of a thing that may be worth any amount to you, and I'll trust to you to treat me fair afterward if it turns out the good thing I expect. And as it is no good losing time about a trifling matter like this, I'll accompany you up to town tomorrow, first train (you pay expenses, of course), and after a few preliminaries I'll just introduce you face to face with your father. You pay after you have him proved sound and right; that is all honest and fair, is not it?"

"It sounds business-like, at any rate."

"It sounds a wonderful cheap bargain, ten dollars for information that may (if you play your cards properly) alter your whole position in life. Ten dollars for information that if you spent a lifetime and a fortune you could not get for yourself. Why, it is dirt cheap. I only do it for you because, to tell the truth, I've got a kind of sneaking kindness for you, Clyde, my boy!"

"It is remarkable kindness, seeing that we have met but once before, to my knowledge," said Clyde, drawing coldly back from the friendly slap on his arm.

"Your knowledge does not embrace everything. One always has to be reminding young fellows of that," observed the horsey man sententiously. "I was born before you, Douglas. I don't want to remind you of it in any

disparaging spirit, but I have seen a thing or two that you have not, my boy."

"I should say you had," replied the other significantly.

"I have seen your father," laughed the man. "Set eyes upon him only a short while ago, which reminded me of you. I was having a look for you, but I've been abroad almost since you were born. Now you would not think it," putting on a confidential air, and drawing himself up—"but between twenty and thirty years ago I was a very smart-looking young fellow."

"I would not doubt your word. Without it, I own the thought would not have occurred to me."

The stranger laughed.

"You are a cool card, you are! 'Pon my word, now, I like you. Well, honor bright, I was as smart a fellow as you would see between here and New York—a trifle wild, perhaps, just always a little fond of betting; but for the rest, just the kind a girl would fall in love with, I should have thought. However, I fell in love with your mother. You need not look like that. I did honestly and truly, only she would not have me, because of a namby pamby man with his gentlemanly airs and graces, who came into the town, for a month, saw her pretty face, and cut me out. He married her. Now, mind you, there ain't many know that; but I was in the church, and saw it done. He married her, right enough; but afterward, like the sneak he was, got her to keep it quiet, and she, poor soft creature (ah, she had better have had me), thought everything he said was true, and behaved accordingly. Well, the end was that she died, over-worked, over-worried, over-tired of waiting, and hoping, and loving, and believing, and being deceived, and scorned, and forgotten, and deserted. She died, and you was a little chap when I saw her, just before she died, and she held you up to me, and she said: 'Do him a good turn if ever you can, Jacques (my name's Jacques). I said: 'My dear, I will;' and it is along of that promise (I'm not one to forget his promises, you see) that I offer you this present information so wonderful and ridiculous cheap, Clyde Douglas. Another thing is, I owe that man a grudge, which you may be surprised to hear I've never had the chance of paying out yet. Now I think that by hurling you upon him, proving the relationship and all that, I shall do it about as neatly as it ever could be done. But, Mr. Douglas, I'll not waste time in argument, but take your own terms. To-morrow will suit you—eighteen train?"

"Eight-ten to-morrow will suit me," replied Douglas.

CHAPTER VII.

"AM I YOUR SON?"

MR. HAMPTON sat in his office, with the work that had accumulated during his holiday surrounding him; with letters unopened before him; with a clerk waiting for a message downstairs, and a telegram that had just arrived lying forgotten in his hand; and he sat with his head leaning back, his eyes fixed vacantly on the dingy opposite wall; his thoughts at Elm Grove.

"A lady, wishing to see you, sir, is waiting below," said a clerk, opening the door after two taps had been given by him unheeded.

"I am engaged," said Mr. Hampton, moving his lips without any other feature. "You can attend to her, Lucas."

But a light footstep sounded on the stairs, and gently walked past the clerk.

"You must see me, Mr. Hampton," said a sweet, tremulous voice.

Then, with a glance at his master's countenance, the discreet clerk withdrew, and shut the door after him.

Winifred raised her veil, and showed her pretty face, without an atom of color in it, her blue eyes with red, tearful rim round them, and her lips pressing back unshed tears.

She looked like an unhappy, beautiful child in the face—like a graceful, stylish woman in figure, as she stood in a dark-blue dress, with cunning little glimpses of crimson silk about it, with a little poke bonnet to match, pressing down her waving hair, and a parasol held in hands that were perfectly gloved, and above which lace ruffles and bangle bracelets appeared.

"Take a seat," said Mr. Hampton, speaking as a poker might do if it had a voice. "To what am I indebted for this honor?"

"Oh, don't speak to me like that!" said poor Winnie, sitting down and letting her parasol drop upon deeds and papers as she clasped her hands. "Mr. Hampton, I've—I've come to—to try what I can do for—for—to save papa—to save him from the ruin you know all about."

"Yes. In what way do you propose to act?"

"Do you know what has happened to us at Elm Grove?" she questioned, desperately. "There are men in the house who do exactly as they like, go where they like, look at what they like. Papa is just like a madman, shut up in a room wailing and crying and moaning and blaming himself, until it breaks my heart,"—the large tears gathering in the eyes still bravely raised to the broker's. "I cooked the dinner yesterday, for the cook would not. Our servants have nearly all left us; we could not ask them to stay. There are tickets, numbers stuck upon all our furniture, chairs, and everything."

"Exactly; in preparation for their sale. And your lady mother, my kind and attentive hostess, may I ask after her?"

His thin lips pressed together, and his eyes glittering, as he turned to her with the smooth inquiry.

She turned away from him impulsively.

"You look as if you did not know what mercy was," she said, in stifled tones.

"I do not boast of an intimate acquaintance with that quality. I know what revenge is!"—slowly.

"And do you intend to have it to the full? Oh, Mr. Hampton!"

"Oh, Miss Erlescombe! is there any reason why I should not have the money that is my right from people who have treated me as you and your two delightful parents have done?"

"You ought to have your money; you shall have it some day. Mr. Hampton, I would see that you had it, every farthing, in time."

"Thanks! You are very kind. I prefer to see after it myself at my own time."

She rose and approached him, trembling in nervousness, and attempting to speak once or twice before words would come to her.

"You are anxious to say something more to me before you go," he said pointedly, and using a tone like ice.

"I want to ask if—if I have brought this in any way upon my parents?" she faltered, gaspingly. "I mean that if when you were so kind as to want me to marry you, if I had said yes, would it have been all different?"

"According to usual manners and customs, a betrothal between you and me would have made an entire difference," he said, looking at her coldly.

She burst into tears, hiding her white face in her hands, and speaking in a broken-hearted kind of wail.

"Then, Mr. Hampton, I can't bear it to see my father like that. I promised to do anything I could to save him, and if—if you care to be engaged to me now—I mean, I do respect you, and it was awfully good of you to think of me, and—I'll try to love you as hard as ever I can, and if you will bear with me and have a little patience, and not expect too much from me all at once"—shrinking as he neared her by one step—"I will make you a good wife, if you want me for your wife now, after you know everything."

"What is everything?" he questioned, stern-

ly. "Hide nothing from me, Winifred Erlescombe."

"I am not going to—I won't, indeed. I had given my heart and my promises to somebody else, Mr. Hampton; but now I think—"

"Now you think you can come and give the empty kernel of your heart and your broken promises to propitiate me. Upon my word, Miss Erlescombe, you honor me. As you are telling me everything, perhaps you will inform me how my money has accomplished this delicious change of resolution?" sneered he.

"Your money?" She looked up in such a flame of indignation as dried her tears and colored her cheeks. "Your paltry, hateful money could never attract me. Mr. Hampton, the man I love has nothing but the spare pittance he earns to share with me; yet it would be happiness—oh, what do I say?—bliss, rapture, perfect happiness to work for and with him, to live like the poorest cottager, to toil like a galley slave with him." And her voice softened in ineffable tenderness that said far more than her impetuous words. "But how can I for the sake of my own happiness sacrifice the parents who brought me into the world, and who have cared for me for nineteen years, when by the sacrifice of myself I can save their declining days from disgrace and misery—I can lengthen their lives, and let them end in peace and prosperity? Self-sacrifice, good men say, is the noblest quality poor humanity can strive after. I don't say I am good; I know I am bad, horrid selfish, vain. I have tried my utmost to try and make myself think I need not do this; that if I kept true to Clyde Douglas I ought to get my own happiness in disobedience to my parents' commands and entreaties. But, Mr. Hampton, I dare not do it. There seems a dreadful fog round me, and I can hardly tell right from wrong"—putting up her hands to her head. "But I must save my father, if in me lies the power. I must try and do what I can to save him from what he thinks a thousand times worse than death. And, Mr. Hampton, I am not speaking nicely—I am too wretched; but I am telling you the exact truth, and so honestly as I tell you that, so honestly and earnestly do I mean to do what I know my duty will be if you—if you care to accept my terms. I mean to forget the past, and think only of you, and will strive to change gratitude and respect into what you would like better. Mr. Hampton, do you believe me?"

He took her two hands closely in his, and bent his searching but not unkind gaze upon her, as he spoke in a softer tone than she had ever heard from him before.

"I do believe you. I could trust a wife whose sense of duty was so strong toward her parents—I could trust her never to disgrace nor deceive her husband, never fail in one letter of her duty toward him; but I could not trust a perverse, wayward, human heart to learn love from duty; and if ever I marry, I must have love freely and unbought from my wife. I had it once, and I valued it not. My punishment to-day is that this poor substitute is offered me to be content with, and I decline it. I decline it; for, child, do not you see that you would do wrong to more people than you would do good to by this proposal of yours? You would wrong, in the first instance, the man you really love—wrong him irreparably and cruelly, a wrong that can never be atoned to him if he loves you as I suppose he does. You would also wrong me. To give me an empty husk for a full heart would be a dangerous gift—poison hidden in nectar, a sting within a caress. You would wrong your parents, for surely their child's happiness is dearer to them than their own; and lastly, you would wrong yourself."

"Myself?" she repeated, with a little, impatient shrug.

"Yourself. You are a better girl, a nobler character, than I thought. Your words to-day have touched springs in my heart that I thought had been dried up forever. You have made

me realize that there is a higher power in the world than money; you have brought back to my remembrance—"

A tap at the door interrupted him, and the discreet clerk spoke from outside it.

"Here is a party most anxious to see you, sir. I told them you were engaged, but they say they will wait any length of time to see you."

"Let them wait!" said his master, curtly.

"I am detaining you," said Winnie, rising and looking for her veil; but again, contrary to all established custom and regulation, visitors had followed the clerk up to the private sanctum, and as the young lady spoke, the door opened wider, and three persons entered unannounced. The first was a man whom Winnie had seen twice before—once as under-groom at the circus, and a second time in the woods by the river. He advanced with an easy swagger and disagreeable smile, gave a little surprised and familiar bow to Miss Erlescombe, and took a seat without being asked. After him came a stout, commonplace, rather vulgarly dressed woman, who stood and fanned herself with a red handkerchief, and panted a good deal after the steepness of the stairs.

"Lord, ain't it close here!" she said.

The third person was a gentleman, tall, distinguished-looking and handsome, at sight of whom Winnie's whole face flushed first deepest crimson, then went deadly pale.

Mr. Hampton turned to him, as the only one of the party whom he knew.

"Mr. Douglas," he said, "I look to you to explain this intrusion."

"There's a pleasant and unpleasant way of stating everything," said the circus man facetiously; "you've a knack of hitting upon the latter, I'm afraid, Mr. Hampton."

Mr. Hampton looked at him chillily.

"If you are the spokesman, sir, perhaps you will state your business, as quickly (never trouble about pleasantness) as possible."

"Then, to hit the nail gently on the head," said the man, rising, and striking an attitude, "this lady here—come forward, my dear"—pushing the stout woman a little forward—"is your old friend, Mrs. Barnes, as sent you a message, but to which you paid no attention. She has been abroad, and lost your address, or you would have heard from her before. You know all about her, don't you? She had a niece—a sweet, fragile, lovely girl, who sewed all day, and whom you took for walks by the river on summer balmy evenings when the birds sung of love, and she listened to them and to you, and, poor trusting moth, she smiled, and believed every word you said. And then you impulsively married her, you know, taking good care, though, to keep it from her aunt, who led the poor girl a hardish life in consequence." The stout lady hereupon applied the red handkerchief to her eyes, and gave utterance to a sob. "But, to strike the nail hard on the head," continued the man, waving a hand theatrically toward Clyde Douglas, "there stands your lawful son and heir—Clyde Hampton, instead of Douglas. It ain't such a pretty name, but right is right, and must be attended to."

"You speak falsely!" said Hampton, with livid lips and agitated eyes.

"Do I?" laughed the man. "I know I don't; Mrs. Barnes, here, knows I don't. Your son, here,"—touching the tall figure that stood like a marble statue—"will soon know I don't. You don't deny that you married Rhoda Barnes, and that you knew—although it was after you had basely deserted her—you know when your son was born? You know that the mother died, and you never saw the boy; but you knew how it lived with people into whose hands you had placed it until old enough to go to school. Then, afterward you know, you sent him to Yale. You know how many years you paid for him there. You know that when he left, you got him the situation you wished him to think his own hands had secured. You know you did that all through other hands, anxious that the boy should never

know that his father had given a thought to him. Then, once started in the world, your conscience was easy. I suppose you thought you had done enough, and you left him, never having seen him yet, to fight his own battles and never trouble you with his presence. You are outwitted, Mr. Hampton; he stands before you there to-day—the boy that called Rhoda Hampton mother; the boy that lived with the clergyman at E—; the boy that went to Yale under the name of Clyde Douglas—your son!"

"Lord, ain't it close!" ejaculated Mrs. Barnes, rolling her handkerchief into a ball, with which to vigorously polish her forehead. Clyde Douglas advanced one step and faced his father.

"Am I your son?" he demanded in slow sternness. "Are you the man whom from babyhood I have regarded with reprobation and contempt? the man who, to gratify some whim of pride or fickle fancy, condemned his innocent wife and child to a disgrace that crushed the life out of the one and warped and imbibited the upgrowing of the other? Was it you, who by cruel neglect and base desertion, tortured to death the trustful, loving, angel heart you had promised to cherish and worship? Look at her!" unfastening the locket hidden behind his watch and putting it into Hampton's hands. "She never uttered one reproachful word, never said one unkind thing of you. She would have taught me to reverence and respect you if it might have been, but, child as I was, I knew a true parent from a false one. I saw her daily sinking under your callous inhuman conduct, and when she died I was worse than orphaned. I am not ungrateful for what you have done for me since her death," slightly raising his voice as Hampton attempted to speak. "But what else have I to thank you for? For a stigma and a slur upon my name under which my feelings have quivered ever since. Alone, uncared for and unloved, the lowliest child in a laborer's cot has had a kindlier bringing up than I; and you who cared not whether I lived or died, whether I grew up a blessing or a curse to my country—cared for nothing but that our relationship should not be brought home to you—you stand before me unwillingly to-day. For the first time we meet face to face, my father and I; and I say"—speaking with more deliberate and sterner emphasis—"I wish you to do me justice; I demand of you that you acknowledge me as your son—you give me the name that is rightly mine; and then, if we never meet again, you will regret it less than I!"

"Lord, don't they speak beautiful now! Just like a play, ain't it?" Mrs. Barnes remarked, filling up a little pause that occurred.

"You are too hard on me," said Hampton, looking up from the locket his eyes had been fixed upon, while Winnie's ready, quick sympathy started at the change in his voice and in his altered countenance. "I was not wholly callous, unfeeling, heartless. I loved your mother when I gave her this locket with my likeness in it. I loved her when we married. I never meant to wrong her, but I was not my own master. Circumstances were against me, and ambition proved stronger than love. I was young then, with a place to make in the world, and my future lay in the hands of an uncle to whom a *mesalliance* would have been an unpardonable crime, so I persuaded Rhoda to keep our marriage secret, and when she wrote after I had left her, begging for the truth to be acknowledged, I, afraid to trust my own weakness, left her letters unopened and unanswered; but I have kept them always with me, as your mother found out"—turning to Winnie—"when she pried into my private belongings. When the unexpected news of my wife's death reached me, I suffered—doubt it if you like—only I was climbing still. The ascent was then just at its steepest, and I could not wait for idle sentiment—I could not be burdened with a child. I had hoped to make my wife happy and prosperous, and to

atone for all her sorrows when my uncle died; but she had been gone for years when that time came, when I stood a rich man and my own master. It was too late then to proclaim to the world the story of years ago, I decided, and it was better to spend money upon you, boy, than sentiment. I had no wish to see you, I own, for I desired to bury the past in deepest oblivion. To-day has disinterred it against my will."

"It only belongs to me to say," spoke Mrs. Barnes, stepping forward with a heated face, using her pocket handkerchief vigorously—"it only becomes me to say what I was brought here for, and then by your leave I'll stop in this close place no longer, for I am stout, and it don't suit me, this musty old hole!"—with a glance of disgust. "I only certify that I had a niece—a pretty, virtuous girl called Rhoda—and I only wish I had known what this gentleman"—turning to Jacques—"has shown me in the register; that the gentleman (Hampton) who paid her attention married her. I am only competent to remark that she had a baby called Clyde, and that he had a strawberry-mark on his arm similar, exact (and very peculiar it was) to one on the arm of this young gentleman"—turning to Douglas—"which he has just shown me. It only becomes me to observe that when they took the boy from me after his mother died—from me as was his natural protector, and who kept him when no pay was given—I think it was shameful to take him away after it was!—they put him first with a clergyman at E—, and then to school, and I went home to old England, but I recognize him to-day because of his eyes (they are like my dear girl's precisely; he favors her, bless her!) and the undoubted strawberry-mark which can't be mistook, as I have said. Now I've said my say."

"And we will leave this happy family," said Jacques, taking the stout lady's arm pleasantly. "I shall see you again shortly, Mr. Douglas, I suppose,"—significantly—"having fulfilled my part of our compact."

"I fulfill mine," said the young man, drawing out a twenty-dollar bill and putting it into the other's hand. "That is more than we agreed on, but your service has been more thorough and satisfactory than I expected."

"Have you a large income?" inquired Hampton, as the door closed upon stout Mrs. Barnes and high-spirited Mr. Jacques, "or do you consider this such a valuable service that you must overpay a scoundrel like that?"

Winifred's slight figure had been hidden by Mrs. Barnes's comfortable proportions.

Douglas's glance now fell upon her for the first time. Hampton saw the change that swept over his face, and bit his own lip as his son sprung forward eagerly.

"Winnie!" he said.

"Clyde!" she faltered, half-putting her hand in his, and drawing back confused and hesitating, glancing first at one then at the other of the two men, and coloring and trembling painfully.

"Are you offended with me?" Clyde inquired in hurt tones. "May I see you for five minutes alone?"

"I have five minutes business with Mr. Hampton, first," replied she, firmly, her eyes shrinking from his, and she sat down because her limbs refused to stand. "I will meet you at Elm Grove or write to you, Clyde, to-morrow. I—I—"

She stopped because something seemed to rise in her throat and choke her utterance.

Clyde regarding her fixedly, mistook her agitation.

"I offer a thousand pardons for having intruded," he said, sarcastically, as he possessed himself of his hat and turned toward the door. "I had no idea of blundering in upon a *tete-a-tete* when I entered here on my own business. I will disturb you no longer."

With a cold, silent bow he would have departed, but Hampton arrested him.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked, hurriedly.

"If you require another interview in regard to the public recognition you are going to make, I presume, of our relationship, I am at your service at any time. I go back to my work on Thursday, but a telegram will bring me at any time required," was the cold response.

"I did not say I was prepared for any public acknowledgment of relationship. Privately, I can and will help you, pecuniarily or in any other way," said the broker, looking at him fixedly.

"Privately I scorn your help, your money, yourself! I want justice, that is all. Affection, I suppose, is in vain to hope for; one can not squeeze milk out of a flint,"—bitterly. "But justice I demand and shall have."

"You may as well shake hands before you go," said Hampton, putting forth his hand weakly and unsteadily. "I have never borne you ill-will, and for what injury I have caused you I am willing to atone and make substantial amends."

"Substantial amends!" said the young man, refusing the offered hand. "Old as you are, Mr. Hampton, it yet remains for you to learn that money is not the dearest thing in this world, and that there are things it cannot buy or pay for. Grasp it, treasure it, if you value it so highly, but do not thrust it forward to stanch the wounds you have caused!"

"And you will not shake hands?" said the elder man, his voice more feeble than its wont.

"There is no affection, no semblance of friendship between us," answered Clyde, relentlessly. "Why should we pass the mockery of an empty form? It is waste of time."

"You will leave me this?" said the lawyer, holding up the pictured face in the locket, and speaking with subdued eagerness and pleading.

"Yes, I will leave you that," replied the other, after a moment's hesitation, "for a couple of days."

"Clyde," faltered Winnie, as he reached the door, "are you not going to say good-by to me, even?" as he slowly went on down the dark stairs. "Clyde, won't you speak to me?—just one more word?" running to the stairs with outstretched hands and imploring, anguished eyes, that he never turned to meet. "Oh, Clyde!"

But the steady step went on unflinching down the stairs and into the street.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HAPPY ENDING.

At the junction at which passengers change from New York to Blyton, two men were pacing up and down the platform, waiting for the train. The evening twilight was falling, and the train was late.

Those two were almost the only passengers upon that particular platform, and it was difficult for them to avoid a rencounter sometimes, as both walked restlessly to and fro. Yet somehow, by accident or mutual design, it was avoided. They never came near enough for a sign of recognition to be strictly required of either.

"Why did I choose this train?" the young man, Clyde Hampton, asked angrily of himself. "Why am I going down at all again to this place? Only because I know I must see her again; for the last time it will probably be. Though it is against my better judgment, against my resolution, against my will, I must see her again."

"Why did I choose this train of all the trains in the twenty-four hours?" the elder man, John Hampton, asked bitterly of himself as he paced up and down. "What I am going to do when I get to this place, I know not. Yet an uncontrollable impulse urges me on. I must go, and when I get there I must decide something. It is contrary to every habit I have formed in my life to act upon impulse, but I cannot help myself to-day."

The train was late, when a bell rung sharply, and the rush of steam and wheels sounded through the gloaming, and standing at the very edge of the platform, Mr. Hampton leaned forward as he had done scores of times

before to see the advancing train. Perhaps he turned dizzy for an instant, perhaps his foot slipped, perhaps he overbalanced; but from whatever cause, he fell on the track before the express train rushing toward him, and, stunned by the fall, lay motionless.

Turning also to notice the train, Clyde saw the slip—the fall—the danger!

With a leap he gained the prostrate form, and raising it as if with the strength of a Hercules, he lifted it beyond the reach of the crushing, snorting engine, with its long train behind it, that shook the station as it rushed past. The slightest slip, and both men would have been ground to powder under the crushing wheels.

Mrs. Erlescombe sat with her husband and daughter in her boudoir that evening as the darkness came on.

The men in possession were in the drawing-room arranging the furniture for the sale that was fast approaching.

Winnie sat by her father's side with his hand in hers, and her head on his arm. She looked pale, dejected, ill, with dark rims round her eyes, and weary, sad lines about the pretty mouth.

Mrs. Erlescombe held a handkerchief to her eyes, but it did not prevent her talking.

"Of course you stick up for your father, Winifred; you two always are everybody, and I nobody; but I don't care, I shall say what I think right, and what I shall say to his dying day—but for him, all would have been different. If I had had my way, you would have married Mr. Hampton quietly, and I should never be in this position. As to that young man Douglas, as he dared to call himself, words simply fail to express my opinion of him!"

"Don't say anything against him," said Winnie, tremblingly, "for if you do I must leave the room!"

"I am not going to be dictated to as to what I shall or shall not say by you, miss. A pretty pass, indeed, things have come to! That young man was a villain—I shall make you hear it—palming himself off on us, deceiving us right and left, trying to get hold of you by false pretenses!"

"Mother, he never pretended to be what he was not. No one was more surprised than he at your mistake. If you had not opened a foolish letter of my schoolfellow's—"

"And what business have you to receive such letters? I shall open them as long as you continue to have them. But for that fellow Douglas to dare propose to you—to presume to ask my consent!"

"Mother, I will not let even you talk to me like this!" said Winnie, rising indignantly.

But her father whispered, "Don't take any notice of her. You know she must talk, and it is mostly I who have got to listen to it." Then, more confidentially, leaning eagerly toward her, "Did you get any concessions out of Hampton, my dear, when you went to him yesterday? What did you say?"

"He promised to write his final decision," said the girl, sinking wearily back with a white look about her eyes and a hand pressed unconsciously upon her heart. "I—I—tried my very best, father dear," speaking more bravely. "I did everything I could for you."

"I am sure you did, child," patting her head. "But I wish he would write. In two days it won't be of much consequence what he decides as far as I am concerned. Do you think that if there is no letter from him tomorrow that if you went up again, little one—"

"Perhaps," said Winnie. "Father, you may rely upon it I will do what I can."

"What are you whispering about there, you two?" asked Mrs. Erlescombe, irritably. "Really, I think you might respect my grief a little if you can't feel for me. I, who married so well, all my friends thought, and planned and wanted my daughter to marry so well, to be brought to this!"

"There's a bell!" said Winnie, rising nervously.

"Perhaps it is a letter, father."

"More men coming in!" exclaimed Mrs. Erlescombe, listening to the sounds in the hall.

"Did you expect any more of these auctioneers, Robert? I declare they are tramping one after the other up the stairs! No, Jane!" sharply, as the servant, after a tap, opened the door. "I won't have them in here! Take them down to join the others in the drawing-room. If that is not good enough for them I do not know what is. The peacock velvet chairs I chose myself, and the bric-a-brac and the hangings."

"It is Mr. Hampton, ma'am," said the servant, quickly; and Mr. Hampton entered, Clyde walking beside him. One glance at the two faces told Winnie that some difference had taken place in their feelings toward one another since last she saw them. In utter astonishment, that, however, did not deprive her of speech, Mrs. Erlescombe rose and advanced toward them.

"Dear Mr. Hampton, this is an unexpected pleasure indeed! I have been so afraid that some little remarks of mine when we parted were misunderstood by you. I am glad indeed to welcome you again in the character of our most welcome and honored guest."

"I do not think I misunderstood the last remarks I heard from you, madam," said the lawyer, bluntly; "nor do I misunderstand you now, I fancy."

Sheshrunk away a little from his keen, satirical, confusing gaze, and looked virulently at Clyde Douglas.

"You have brought this young villain to expose him, I suppose? Mr. Hampton, it is needless. We know his deception, his plots, his lowness. We know—"

"Do you know his parentage?" inquired Hampton.

"I know that it is the lowest of the low. I know that indeed he was no fit associate or companion for you, dear Mr. Hampton. The particulars of his low birth I care not to know," waving her hand grandly—"but I know enough to—"

"Show, as usual, your want of judgment and sense!" finished the other quietly.

"Madam, you know a little of my private affairs, thanks to your prying into my secret correspondence. You are aware, I believe, that I had a wife and child. Permit me now to introduce the latter to you here. My son and heir, Clyde Hampton!"—putting his hand upon his companion's shoulder, who smilingly bowed.

For once, Mrs. Erlescombe was bereft of speech. She simply stared and opened her mouth.

"Winnie has told you nothing of this, madam, I presume, from your blank look."

"Winifred tells me nothing. She never minds what shocks her poor mother has. She went up to New York, yesterday, without telling me a thing she did either before or after. If she went to plan with you this miserable, absurd, incredible joke, then I can only say I think you might have been better employed, both of you."

"Winnie had something better to do. Come here, child,"—putting out his hand to the girl. "You have no secrets from the present company, I suppose?" And as she shook her head, he continued, still holding her hand, "Winnie came up to my office, to try by every means in her power to induce me to save her father. She even offered herself as my bribe. She offered, if no other price could be accepted, to agree to the proposals of marriage I had made her."

"Dear, sensible, right-feeling girl!" murmured the mother. "But why was I not told of this?"

"But in her honest, straightforward way she admitted that her heart was given and her hand promised to another—(no, child, you need not shrink away; there is nothing to

be ashamed of in the truth)—to Clyde Hampton, here; and so, before I gave Winifred any definite reply, I thought it wise to come down and interview her parents, to whom, surely, their child's happiness must be of greater importance than a house and land and furniture. I ask you both," turning slowly to them, "do you wish your daughter to marry the man to whom she has given the whole of her warm, young, strong affection—a man against whom not a syllable can be breathed—a man with health and strength, and a devoted love to give the wife of his choice?"

Winnie colored, and turned away.

Clyde silently looked at her.

"Or do you prefer that her life shall be wrecked—warped, shadowed forever—by uniting herself to a man who could, indeed, love her well, but to whom no feeling but daughterly kindness or gratitude could ever rise in her heart. Is she to be a wife smiling or weeping, loving or suffering? I ask you, her parents. She has shown willingness to sacrifice her whole chance of happiness for you; are you less generous than she?"

"I married without love myself," replied Mrs. Erlescombe, calmly. "I married for position, for money, as I want Winifred to do; and I think Robert and I have jogged along very comfortably considering. Of course, we have hot words, like all married people, but—"

But Mr. Erlescombe had risen, his better feelings roused by the broker's speech—his thought impelled to words by his wife's last assertion.

"I say, let her marry the man she loves," he said, speaking decidedly for once in his life. "I did not know she was fighting against her heart when she agreed to the request I made. I retract that now, for my daughter is more to me than land or house. She is guiltless of, and she shall not suffer for, her parents' folly and weakness. Winnie, dear," standing upright, and looking, as he had not done for long, a picture of a fine old gentleman, "I give my consent to your marriage whenever you please."

"Simpleton!" breathed his wife; but before she had time to gasp any more, Hampton's clear, slow voice took up the story.

"My daughter," he said, and he drew forth a paper and put into her hand, "I give you my wedding-present—a present I give to yourself, not on account of your father's weakness or your mother's duplicity, but on account of your womanly love, truth, and self-devotion. It is the mortgage I hold on your father's property," he said, smiling as she opened it and raised dazed eyes to his. "You can burn it in those candles if you choose. And for my son's sake—my son who paid a debt of neglect and life-long injury by risking his own life to save mine," his voice thrilled and deepened as he looked at his son, and even Mrs. Erlescombe held her breath and listened to him, "I hand over, the day he is married, property to the amount of five thousand a year. He has brains and strength; he can earn more. I am rich and have few wants, and can easily spare this much. During my life I think my son and daughter will give me a welcome when I need rest and change and affection, and at my death Clyde will have everything I possess. Well, little woman, what is it?"

Winnie had crept to his side, and with arms twined round his had raised a glance intense, tearful, eloquent in its gratitude and admiration.

"Oh, Mr. Hampton!" was all she could falter.

"Oh, Miss Erlescombe, are not you going to destroy that paper, or must we leave you and Clyde to do it privately?"

"Oh, Mr. Hampton, it is too much! Give us half—a quarter!"

There came an uneasy expression into Mrs. Erlescombe's face, and she touched the girl as she whispered, "Winnie, dear, you are ungrateful!"

But Winnie protested

"I am not ungrateful! You know better, Mr. Hampton. But I have behaved so badly, so heartlessly; and now this is too much—more almost than I can bear, more than we can ever hope to repay if we live to be—"

"Ancient Mariners!" interposed Hampton, smiling quietly. "You told me you looked upon me in that histrionic light once, Winnie."

"Don't remind me of all the rudeness that is making me loathe myself!" she cried sobbingly. "Oh, Mr. Hampton, I will try—indeed, indeed I will try to be worthy of your generosity! If you could just only look into my heart now—"

"Suppose I depute Clyde to do that?" said the broker lightly.

But Mrs. Erlescombe noticed a softening in his hard, keen eyes, as if he were about to shed tears—an unusual thing for him.

"Erlescombe," said he, "you and I will go down and dismiss these men below."

He treated the lady-wife with most sovereign contempt, but she arose in the most obsequious manner, and followed him.

"Let me hold a light for you, dear Mr. Hampton! Let me run down first, and see if the room is comfortable for you to enter! Let me give some orders for supper, may I? Is there anything you would particularly care for? Robert, you are showing our noble benefactor no attention at all. I am ashamed of you! Dear Mr. Hampton, mind that awkward turn in the stairs! Robert, can't you hold that candle to light him better, stupid?"

Clyde Hampton and Winifred stood together as the trio left them, with the light of the candles falling on her fair, sweet, agitated face, on her white dress and clasped hands, as she stood leaning against the chimney-piece. She did not look up to meet the earnest, thrilling glance that she felt upon her, but she did not shrink away when he took her hands in his and raised them to his neck.

"Winnie, so you do love me after all, little darling?"

"So your father says," she whispered, hiding her face on his breast.

"It is very refreshing to hear one's father says so, but I should like to hear it from my wife herself."

"I did not know you had got a wife, sir."

"Don't taunt me with what is no fault of mine. I will have one to-morrow, or next day, if it can be managed."

"I have a presentiment that it cannot be. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' Mr. Hampton."

"Not if I marry you."

"Ah, that makes a difference, certainly."

As he answered his light tone vanished, and Winnie felt his heart beating as he clasped her to it.

"It makes all the difference between light and darkness, bliss and misery, life and death. Winnie, my darling, my sweetheart, I know it for a fact, but I want to hear it from your own lips, that you love me!"

"Oh, Clyde, it is a most unnecessary ceremony; but if you insist"—raising her lovely eyes, then drooping them before his ardent gaze, yet speaking with passionate intensity, a force he felt the strength of as she uttered the low words—"Clyde, my darling, I love you better than my life!"

It was a gay wedding, and Blyton was *en fete* when the only daughter of Robert Erlescombe, of Elm Grove, married the only son of Mr. Hampton, the rich stock broker.

Eva Lowrie, the schoolfellow who had written the gushing epistle about Claude Dunhaven was one of the bridesmaids, in crimson satin and white lace, who followed the bride in her trailing cream moire and silk.

The evening before the wedding she said to her friend, "Oh, Winnie, I never found time to write and contradict that statement about Claude Dunhaven coming to your neighborhood *incog.*, but I suppose it never affected you. You were too busy with his friend, my dear—the very handsomest

man I ever saw, Winnie—to look about for even a millionaire. He was engaged to his cousin, after all, so you could not have caught him; but I think, my friend, you are about as happy as you can be, as it is."

"I am," said Winnie, with a soft glance across to where her lover stood, "as happy as any human being can be; and"—rising and putting her hand on her future father-in-law's arm as he approached her—"I owe it all to you, Mr. Hampton!"

THE END.

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